

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

**THE MYSTERY OF THE
SERPENT STAR**



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A menacing giant of a man appears and imposes on The Three Investigators to solve a mysterious case with only very little information to start with. As they scramble to gather bits and pieces of clues, they discover that the case has links to iconic events from the Wild West, and that the whole mission seems to be a scavenger hunt for an ominous ‘star’. However, time is running short as the giant reappears and threatens Jupiter, Pete and Bob if they do not manage to solve the case within the time limit he specifies.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Serpent Star

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(The Three ???: Under the Sign of the Snakes)

by

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1. A Gigantic Surprise

“Are there real treasures in these boxes?” Pete asked. “By weight, the sarcophagus of King Tut could be in there with several pots of precious stones!”

With great effort, Pete and Bob brought another huge cardboard box off the pick-up truck’s cargo area. The heat was tropical and the fine dust that had been stirred up formed an unpleasant film on his sweaty skin. Breathing heavily, the Second Investigator propped himself against the wall of the storeroom where Uncle Titus kept his more valuable items.

Pete looked up at the withered top of a lone conifer. There was no movement. Even the birds seemed to have lost their desire to chirp in the midday heat. The Second Investigator took a deep sip from his mineral water bottle. How long had they been unloading now? Twenty minutes? Half an hour? It already seemed like an eternity to him and the darned loading area just didn’t seem to be getting any emptier.

On paper, it had all looked so harmless—five hundred collector’s items from the clearance sale of an antique shop in Pasadena. All of it was to go under the hammer at a big auction here on Saturday on the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard. There were only two days left to make all the preparations! This was going to be fun...

Uncle Titus smiled wryly. “‘Treasures’ would be an exaggeration. They are rather collectors’ items, primarily European arts and crafts. No masterpieces, but solid objects of value, including furniture, porcelain, several mirrors and paintings.”

Exhausted, Jupiter massaged his wrists and cast a sceptical glance at the numerous boxes. “Your enthusiasm is in all honour, Uncle Titus, but actually such an extensive auction is almost out of our league, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Uncle Titus agreed. “That’s why I’m working on the preparations with Steve Mitchum, an old acquaintance from Santa Monica. He runs the Mitchum & Ferguson Gallery there.”

Bob nodded. “Sure, I’ve heard of it! Dad told me about an exhibition there that attracts a lot of people. It’s about some sort of abstract modern art, I think.”

“Oh, the man who came on Tuesday was Mr Mitchum?” Pete enquired.

Uncle Titus nodded. “Steve has been in the business for over forty years and has organized countless auctions. When it comes to logistics and advertising, he knows more than anyone else in the business.”

Bob casually wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand. He looked a little embarrassed. “And... who was the pretty young woman who was with him?”

“Well...” Pete gave his colleague an amused look. “—Do I hear a hint of a crush?”

“You can’t blame Bob for that,” Uncle Titus explained with a groan as he and Jupiter gingerly stacked two boxes labelled ‘Caution! Fragile!’ piled on top of each other. “Sheila Masters is really very attractive and she is also Steve’s assistant and right-hand woman. As far as I know, she even works as a model now and then, besides studying art—seriously, of course.”

Jupiter grinned broadly. “A model with academic qualities. I must say you have exquisite taste, Bob!”

Pete couldn’t help blowing an appreciative whistle either.

"Stop that nonsense!" Bob waved off irritably. "All I said was that the woman's appearance is not exactly average. That's all!"

"I get it," Pete murmured, barely audible.

With gentle force, Uncle Titus pushed aside an old chest of drawers whose space was now needed for the rest of the boxes. "Anyway, Sheila is coming in an hour's time to go over the final details... and we should be done here by then. I'm expecting the delivery of the parts for the auction stage shortly. We need every spare space to be able to assemble it."

Jupiter sighed softly. "We just can't get to stand still for a moment..."

At that moment, the First Investigator noticed a huge man entering the yard area and coming towards them with long strides.

About two metres tall, the giant had the build of a full-grown grizzly bear and with about the same amount of hair—at least on the head and face. He wore an old-fashioned long duster coat, with the tattered hem reaching the top of his leather boots. The overall condition of his rough, dirt-encrusted get-up gave the impression that the stranger had just marched across the Nevada desert. His brutal features and the mane sticking wildly from his head completed the image of a man better not to be messed with.

"My goodness," Jupiter murmured half aloud, drawing the attention of the others to the approaching visitor. "He could be Mr Hyde's brother."

Pete swallowed involuntarily. "Mr Hyde's big brother."

In the meantime, the giant had reached the storeroom and stood in front of Jupiter with a deadpan expression. The metal buttons of his coat reflected the glaring sunlight.

"Are you the investigators?" a piercingly deep bass voice rang out. Two sinister eyes stared down at Jupiter, reflecting condescension and iciness.

There was something deeply unsettling in that look and the First Investigator had to try hard to manage a half-convincing smile. "We are The Three Investigators, that's right, and this is my uncle—"

"I don't need an uncle!" the man harshly cut him off. He pulled a bank note and a small package from the inside pocket of his coat. "Here are fifty dollars... and this is the puzzle. Solve it and I'll give you another fifty. I'll come back later."

With that, the giant turned around and left.

For a split-second, Jupiter was simply speechless. Then he regained his composure. "Hey! Wait a minute, sir! What's your name anyway?"

In the main gate, the giant paused for a moment.

"Don't ask, find the star!" he growled without looking back. Then he was gone.

Incredulous, Pete shook his head. "What was that about?"

Bob looked puzzled at the package and the fifty dollars in Jupiter's hands. "This was the shortest instructions received in the history of The Three Investigators..."

2. Dead Man's Hand

Before The Three Investigators could turn to their new case, Uncle Titus first ordered the last boxes to be unloaded and stowed away in the storeroom. After that, the entire area between the main gate and the storeroom had to be cleared out in order to create sufficient space for the auctioneer's stage to be constructed later.

When Miss Masters arrived and was shown into the yard office by Uncle Titus, Jupiter, Pete and Bob took advantage of the welcome interruption to catch their breath on the verandah of the yard office. No sooner had they made themselves comfortable on the old wicker chairs than the door opened and Aunt Mathilda stepped outside, holding a tray with glasses and a large decanter.

"So, for our hard workers, we now have a little refreshment—homemade lemonade, iced of course. What do you think?"

Jupiter beamed all over his face. "Great, Aunt Mathilda! We can really use a cold drink now!"

"You bet!" Carefully, Bob picked up the tray and set it down on a small table. "I'm already completely parched from this monkey heat."

"Me too," Pete agreed, already scooping the fourth ice cube into his glass.

Aunt Mathilda looked around with amusement. "Well, enjoy your drinks!"

"We'll do that for sure!" In high spirits, Bob raised his glass filled to the brim.

"Oh yes, and if you want a refill, there's a full jug in the bottom left-hand corner of the fridge. I know how thirsty you are."

Jupiter looked at her trustingly. "Have I ever told you that you are the best aunt in the whole country?"

Mrs Jones smiled mischievously. "Aha! We're getting better! Last week I was the greatest aunt in California. I can't wait to see what comes next!" Waving, she disappeared back into the office.

The First Investigator took a big gulp from his glass with relish. The ice-cold lemonade was truly a blessing... For a brief moment, Jupiter gave himself over to the pleasant feeling of complete relaxation. A moment later, however, his features took on a concentrated expression again. Clearing his throat, he straightened up.

"Fellas, then let's devote ourselves to intellectual challenges again after this physical torture," Jupiter decided. "Let's go to Headquarters so that we can discuss without interruptions."

With that, the three of them left the verandah and made their way to a huge pile of scrap metal located by the fence at one end of the salvage yard. Hidden under this pile of junk was an old mobile home trailer which served as the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

To get to this trailer, Jupiter went up to a discarded refrigerator embedded in the pile of junk. This was the Cold Gate, a secret entrance to their headquarters. After ensuring that no outsiders were looking, he opened the door, and crept into the empty fridge. There, he triggered a secret mechanism which allowed the back door to slide away to reveal a narrow tunnel constructed from corrugated sheet metal.

He crept into the tunnel, followed by Pete. Bob went in last and closed the fridge door behind him. Then the three of them crept along the short tunnel that led to the door of the trailer. Jupiter opened the door, entered it and switched on the light.

Apart from being a meeting place for them, the trailer housed sophisticated technical gadgets and equipment, such as computers, video, electronic, and communications devices. There were also several book shelves and filing cabinets where they stored folders and files containing reports of their past cases. At the back of the trailer was a small crime laboratory where they analyzed fingerprints and traces.

Jupiter rummaged the small package wrapped in brown paper out of his jeans pocket and placed it thoughtfully on the table. After settling down in a ramshackle swivel chair, he asked: "Is it just me or was our visitor's performance earlier rather absurd?"

Pete snorted contemptuously. "Absurd? That's the understatement of the month!" The Second Investigator skilfully imitated the giant's menacingly grim grating voice: "Don't ask, find the star! Seems like that guy isn't ticking all the right boxes."

Bob smiled. "I guess that's what you call a man of few words."

"What's all this nonsense about 'finding the star' anyway? After all, we are investigators, not astronomers!" Pete commented.

"There is certainly a different meaning behind the term 'star', but that doesn't make this giant any less strange," Jupiter explained thoughtfully, "and then this strange pin on his coat collar—a silver gravestone with flames blazing above it! Well, it's not exactly normal."

"We've had strange clients before," Bob added, "actually remarkably often, if you think about it."

"That's right," Jupiter replied. "Still, I don't particularly like being treated like a third-rate errand boy."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Well, maybe King Kong just ate a bad banana."

Bob grinned. "—Or a bad lunch—only five steaks instead of eight! Now come on, Jupe! Forget your wounded ego and unwrap the thing now! I can tell by the tip of your nose that you can't wait to find out what's inside!"

"All right..." With a theatrical flourish, the First Investigator took the package from the table and carefully pulled off the adhesive strip. A pack of cards was revealed, held together by a black rubber band.

Pete was visibly taken aback. "A simple pack of cards? Nothing more?"

"We'll see." Gingerly, Jupiter slipped off the rubber band and fanned the cards apart. "First of all, this is a classic deck of cards in the Anglo-American pattern, which is also known as the International pattern. You can easily buy such cards in shops here. So we can already rule out a geographical clue."

Pete scratched his head in surprise. "You mean there are other packs of cards?"

"Yes, of course," Jupe said. "In the French pattern, some letters and parts of the design differ from the Anglo-American pattern, for example, instead of 'J' for 'Jack, the French uses 'V' for 'Valet'. In the Swiss-German pattern, the suits are not named 'hearts', 'diamonds', 'clubs', and 'spades', instead they are 'roses', 'bells', 'acorns', and 'shields'. Depending on the nation and the type of game, there are many other variations."

Bob grinned appreciatively. "Your knowledge of playing cards paid off right away," he said.

"A broad horizon of knowledge is always an advantage," Jupiter asserted. "Since the geographical origin of the game does not give us a starting point, we should now turn to the manufacturing company. There is a small label here on the cover, on which you can clearly see the name—'Star Games'!"

“Star Games? We have our ‘star’ already!” Pete exclaimed delightedly.

Bob shook his head. “Well, call me a nagging pessimist if you like, but I can’t imagine it’s worth fifty dollars to the giant if we give him the name of a playing card company... not to mention the fact that we won’t even accept his fee.”

“That is not a pessimistic assessment at all, but rather a realistic one,” the First Investigator replied. “I too am of the opinion that this ‘star’ on the label is merely part of a larger context. If you look very closely, you can still see the remnant of a faint stamp above the lettering.”

Pete leaned forward, interested. “Really? Let me see!”

With narrowed eyes, the Second Investigator looked at the faint letters which were barely legible. “Giz... Gizma... no, wrong... Gizmo! Gizmo’s Castle!”

Jupiter stumbled. “Gizmo’s Castle? That’s that little souvenir shop by the harbour! I’ve never been there myself, but Uncle Titus got lost there once. It must be crammed with all sorts of impossible stuff. The ugly lava lamp in our hallway came from there.”

“Well, that’s something.” Tensely, Bob leafed through the rest of the cards. “Hmm... The second clue seems to be the absence of certain cards. Anyway, I’m missing the queen of hearts. Come on, let’s sort it all out!”

He spread out the cards on the table and together they began to arrange the cards by suit.

“So, diamonds are complete,” Pete announced after a few seconds.

Jupiter nodded. “Hearts too, except for Bob’s queen. What about spades?”

“The ace and the eight are missing,” Bob announced.

“It’s the same with clubs!” Pete observed. “The ace and the eight are missing.”

A smile played around Jupiter’s lips. “So there are a total of five cards missing—two aces, two eights and a queen. That settles it.”

Irritated, Bob tilted his head. “Is it? And in what way?”

“Very simple, fellas.” A familiar twinkle flashed in the First Investigator’s eyes. “Poker, as you know, is about using five playing cards to form what is called a hand, and there are all sorts of names for these hands, for example ‘Full House’, ‘Straight Flush’ and so on. As we can see, there are five missing cards in this deck, in particular, they include two black aces and two black eights. This is the so-called ‘Dead Man’s Hand’.”

Pete blinked nervously. “The Dead Man’s Hand? That doesn’t sound very friendly.”

Impatiently, Bob waved his hand in the air. “May we assume that our poker guru also knows the origin of this unfriendly name?”

Jupiter’s smile grew even wider. “You may. This hand is named after one of the most famous gunslingers of the Wild West—namely James Butler Hickok, otherwise known as ‘Wild Bill Hickok’.”

Pete snapped his fingers. “Sure, I’ve heard of him! He’s a real Western legend, after all.”

“Well, Wild Bill’s death was as violent as his life,” Jupe continued. “He was shot in the back while playing poker... and now guess what hand he was holding.”

“Well, I’ll take a bold guess at two black aces and two black eights,” Bob replied with a grin, “hence the ‘Dead Man’s Hand’!”

“But what’s the fifth card?” Pete asked. “Is it the queen of hearts?”

“Nobody knows for sure what the fifth card was,” Jupe said. “In fact, all this could just be a legend. Some historians question the authenticity of the account, suggesting that this was only popularized many years later. In any case, this hand is now known as such, irrespective of whether it can be verified.”

Satisfied, the First Investigator leaned back in his chair. “So now we have Gizmo’s Castle, Wild Bill and a flaming gravestone pin. We should be able to do something with

that.”

Pete nodded. “I can take care of this Gizmo. Later I have to pick up an order for my mum at Mr Frinton’s fish shop, so I’ll be at the harbour anyway.”

“Very well. In the meantime, Bob can do some more research on Wild Bill and the circumstances of his demise. I myself probably won’t be able to leave the salvage yard all day. Someone has to assemble the auction stage.”

Bob patted him on the shoulder encouragingly. “You still have our support for a while. So let’s get to work!”

3. Sheila Masters

The three friends progressed faster than expected and had almost completed the stage when Miss Masters said goodbye to Uncle Titus and walked to her car less than an hour later.

Before she got in, however, she paused briefly, then turned and approached the boys. She was wearing a figure-hugging summer dress and her loose dark brown hair reached to her hips. Bob saw her from a distance and hoped fervently that she would not address him, but Jupiter or Pete. A tingling sensation spread through his stomach and his heartbeat accelerated noticeably.

Even though he would never have admitted it to the others, Sheila Masters fascinated him. The reason lay years in the past. At that time, a young couple had lived in the immediate vicinity of the Andrews, and this couple had a pretty daughter by the name of Juliet... In retrospect, the feelings Bob had felt for the girl had been a little more than a harmless teenage crush. At the time, he had been head over heels crazy about her.

However, there had been a serious catch—Bob was only twelve and Juliet sixteen. Her interest in the shy bookworm next door had therefore been about as great as Jupiter's preference for modern expressive dance—just below zero. Bob could just as well have lived in the abyss of a deep-sea trench or on the far side of the moon. He had been practically invisible. Apart from an occasional 'hello', Juliet had hardly noticed him.

After three quarters of a year, she had simply moved away. Bob had never heard from her or her family again, and yet Juliet had never completely disappeared from his memory over the years—like a slowly fading photograph that one could not want to part with.

And that's what Sheila Masters reminded him of—Juliet. At first, Bob had thought it was actually her, as the resemblance was so striking. In the meantime, of course, he had realized that he had been mistaken, but the 'new' Juliet still attracted him almost magically. Even during her first visit the past Tuesday, Bob had cast furtive glances at her from afar, unobtrusively of course. However, if she spoke directly to him now, Jupiter and Pete would definitely notice what was going on in him. "Please not be me, please not be me, please not be me," it hammered in his head.

Smiling, Miss Masters stopped in front of Bob. "You must be the famous investigators, right? I'm Sheila Masters."

Bob froze in a stock-still posture and, as if at the push of a button, his face colour changed to a rich fire-engine red. From one second to the next, there was a black void in his head, as if someone had switched off the TV in the middle of a movie. All streams of thought were suddenly cut off. All that remained was a dull roaring in his ears and this single wish: 'Don't make a fool of yourself now!'

"Uh... Pleased to meet you. I... am Bob Andrews." He felt as if there was a complete stranger speaking. He wondered if Miss Masters noticed any of this. Nervously, he looked into two deep brown eyes that looked at him expectantly.

Expectantly? Bob remembered that he also had to introduce his friends! He quickly looked over at Jupiter and Pete. How long had this embarrassing pause lasted? Five seconds? Five minutes? Never mind, now it had to be quick! With a wave of his hand, he hastily

pointed to his friends. "Uh—and these are my colleagues... uh... uh..." Bob forgot his friends' names.

Smiling, the First Investigator quickly intervened and held out his hand to the visitor. "Jupiter Jones. Pleased to meet you, Miss Masters."

"And I'm Pete Crenshaw, good afternoon!"

Sheila looked from one to the other with amusement. "It's nice to meet you, but please call me Sheila, otherwise I feel so terribly old."

"Sure, Sheila!" Bob was beaming like a Cheshire cat. Obviously, his lapse had no further consequences. With a bit of luck, the afternoon could still be really great!

"So you are The Three Investigators."

"That's right." Smiling, Jupiter pulled out a slim black case, took out a business card, and handed it to Sheila, who read it attentively. It said:



Miss Masters grinned appreciatively. "The famous card of The Three Investigators. Mr Jones has already told me a lot about you super sleuths."

"My uncle tends to exaggerate at times," Jupiter flattered.

"Maybe some investigators are just inclined to be overly modest?" replied Sheila saucily. Then she lowered her voice a little and her look became more serious. "Say..." She looked around quickly to see if no one was within earshot. "Can I talk to you about a rather private matter? It has nothing at all to do with the auction the day after tomorrow."

Interested, Pete took a step closer. "Could you go into a little more detail?"

"I'd love to, but not out here, if you don't mind. Can we talk somewhere undisturbed?"

"Of course." Bob wanted to point to the verandah, but Aunt Mathilda was sitting there sipping her coffee. "I suppose it is best to go to the outdoor workshop."

"Yes," The First Investigator agreed. "Let's go now."

In principle, The Three Investigators would not allow outsiders into their Headquarters, as they wanted to keep the place a secret. However, located outside the trailer was their workshop. It used to be surrounded by a pile of scrap metal, but recently, the three boys restructured the camouflage using unwanted bedsteads and kitchen furniture. In the process, they created an obscure entrance to the workshop from the yard, so now they could use the space as an outdoor meeting place for visitors.

As they were walking past the storeroom, heading to the workshop, a hoarse call sounded from afar: "Jupiter! Can I have a word with you?" The First Investigator looked around. It was Mr Hunnicutt, one of their neighbours from across the street. He was at the main gate and raised his hand in greeting.

"Oh no! Crazy Abner." Jupiter sighed softly, then turned to Bob, Pete and Sheila. "You guys go on ahead and I'll join you in a minute, okay?"

"All right, sir!" Pete saluted playfully. "Just don't let him talk you into any of that stuff again. Those old uniforms he talked you into last time—"

“—Were actually not from the American War of Independence, but from Errol’s Wonderful World of Carnival—I know, I know!” Jupiter interrupted him. “But don’t worry—only Uncle Titus is allowed to do business with Abner Hunnicutt now.”

In fact, there had already been one or two disagreements with the extremely enterprising Mr Hunnicutt regarding his various ‘guaranteed historical’ finds. The elderly gentleman with the flowing white hair had always put these irregularities down to his declining eyesight and the shamelessness of dishonest flea market vendors. In any case, he was now considered a ‘Risk Category One’ customer and was therefore only served by the boss himself. So Jupiter would not get involved in any discussions about the antiquarian value of stagecoach signs or Apache feather jewellery, but would refer Mr Hunnicutt directly to Uncle Titus.

The man at the main gate, who resembled a dishevelled cross between Albert Einstein and Barney Rubble, did not seem to have come for a sales talk. At least he wasn’t carrying any merchandise, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. After all, he could have George Washington’s stamp collection or some other junk hidden under his jacket. Jupiter took another deep breath and put on a polite smile.

“Good afternoon, Mr Hunnicutt! If you have anything to sell, you would have to contact my uncle—”

“No, no—I don’t have anything with me today,” Mr Hunnicutt replied quickly.

‘Thank goodness!’ ran through Jupiter’s head.

“Actually, I just wanted to ask for something,” Hunnicutt explained hesitantly.

“And what is it?”

“Yes, well... next time you have guests overnight, please be good enough to tell them to park away from the front of my house.”

The First Investigator was visibly irritated.

“The thing is...” Hunnicutt continued, “there was this blue van that was parked in front of my house all night and didn’t leave until eight this morning. It’s not that it was blocking my driveway, but the van was parked right outside my bedroom window and I like to be woken up by the first light of the sun in the morning.”

Jupiter tried to get his thoughts in order. “Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr Hunnicutt. We didn’t have anyone over yesterday—neither in the evening nor overnight.”

“No?” Abner Hunnicutt’s surprise was plain to see. “Well, that’s strange. I could have sworn the driver went straight over to your yard here.”

The First Investigator listened up. “Can you perhaps describe what the man looked like?”

Hunnicutt shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. You know my eyes aren’t at their best. I just remember him coming in about ten o’clock at night and wondering why he was parked so far away when he wanted to come here.”

Frowning, Jupiter let his gaze wander over the salvage yard. “Was the visitor possibly particularly tall or dressed conspicuously in some way?”

“Particularly big? Well, I didn’t notice anything, but with my handicap...” He tapped against his thick glasses.

The First Investigator nodded regretfully. “Well, as I said, we didn’t have any visitors. The whole thing seems to have been a coincidence... but if we do have overnight guests, I will of course be happy to accommodate your request.”

“Thank you very much, that’s really nice.” Hunnicutt beamed and waved goodbye. “Believe me, there’s nothing better than being woken up by the morning sun rising.”

“I’ll remember that!” the First Investigator called after him. In his mind, however, he was back with the nocturnal visitor who had allegedly been at the salvage yard. He wondered if Mr Hunnicutt’s bad eyes had played a trick on him. At least there had definitely not been a

customer on the premises after 6 pm. Jupiter shook his head and turned towards the workshop. Since nothing had happened, it was not worth worrying about the matter unnecessarily.

If he had noticed a dark figure watching him intently from the shadow of a corner of a house, his judgement would undoubtedly have been different.

4. Roller Coaster of Emotions

When Jupiter entered the outdoor workshop, the first thing he noticed was Bob's hectic activity—obviously making an effort to display consummate host qualities. He had just carefully cleaned the dusty old garden chairs and placed cloth over them. Then he set up a portable table and poured Sheila a cup of iced coffee, which he had run back to the yard office to get.

Pete signalled to Jupiter with an amused wink that there was nothing more to worry about here as Bob was taking care of everything.

Sheila was visibly impressed by the attentive service. "I am completely gobsmacked! Tell me, do you take such touching care of all your clients?"

Pete smiled broadly. "Of course. We don't make any distinctions, right, Bob?"

"Uh, that's right," Bob muttered pointedly casually, giving Pete a scowl. "But let's get back to Sheila's request... or is there any more news from Mr Hunnicutt?" He turned to Jupiter.

The First Investigator shook his head. "No, that was just a misunderstanding, and fortunately it wasn't about new sales offers either."

The First Investigator took a seat on a vacant garden chair and smiled invitingly at Sheila. "Well, tell us what's on your mind."

"Well, where do I start?" Sheila sat back and took a deep breath. "Well, it's like this... three weeks ago, a friend invited me to a party. I was going to forego it because of all the work at the gallery, but because Cathy was nagging me about it all the time, I went in the end. I thought it was really great. There was a lot going on, the music was great and you could meet lots of nice people."

She fiddled nervously with her jade bracelet while she seemed to be searching for the right words. "One of the guests, who was standing a bit apart, caught my eye right at the beginning—not because he pushed himself to the fore, but simply because I immediately liked him in terms of appearance—tall, dark-haired and incredibly good-looking."

Bob, who until now had been dreamily listening to the sound of Sheila's voice rather than the content of her story, suddenly had second thoughts. Had she just been talking about an incredibly handsome man she had met at some party? Nonsense, he must have misheard. His thoughts returned to a picturesque beach promenade where he and Sheila were strolling arm in arm, enjoying the glorious sunshine.

Hesitantly, Sheila continued: "Well, anyway, in the course of the evening, I finally dared to approach him. His name is Seanford Newman and I liked him from the first second. We were somehow on the same wavelength and there was a certain crackle in the air right from the start."

Bob swallowed. Thick storm clouds had just appeared over the seafront.

Sheila's gaze took on a dreamy expression. "I'm not usually like that at all, but with Sean it was the proverbial love at first sight, a quick eye contact, a smile and boom! Head over heels in love."

The seafront has just gone down in a thunderous hailstorm.

"Well, that's great!" Jupiter finally said into the awkward silence that followed.

Bob made a squeezing sound. It took all his self-control not to let his disappointment show. Hastily he nodded. "Yes, fantastic!"

Sheila sighed softly. "Actually, you're right. He's a really adorable, humorous and sensitive person, but..." She hesitated again.

"But what?" The First Investigator leaned forward and looked at her encouragingly.

"Well, I noticed on the first evening how closed off he was when I asked him any questions about his life. It was as if he had something to hide. Even at the next meetings, he always reacted evasively when I wanted to know something about him or his past."

"Maybe he's just shy," Pete interjected.

"He is sensitive, that's true," Sheila confirmed. "That's what I like about him. He's sensitive and very romantic, and not one of those usual macho guys with a big mouth and nothing behind it."

"Wow, a real womanizer," Bob murmured, barely audible. One thing was already certain—he thoroughly disliked this Seanford—and it's not just the stupid name alone...

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. "But there's something else, right?"

Sheila glanced to the side. "That's right. At the party we also talked about our respective interests, and Seanford told me that he was also a great art lover. I was very happy about that, of course, because such a commonality connects people. Later it turned out that he didn't even know Rembrandt or Monet!"

"That's strange, though," Jupiter agreed, scratching the back of his head.

Pete nodded. "Like if a music lover didn't know who Elvis and the Beatles were."

Bob could hardly hide his glee as he thought to himself: "Mr Perfect, my foot!"

"It gets weirder," Sheila continued. "At all the meetings so far, he always had some excuse up his sleeve as to why I couldn't visit him at his house. First it was painting work; the next time he had a business meeting; then supposedly his brother was visiting and so on. It was a real no-go area."

Bob grinned grimly. That fitted the picture perfectly, he thought. Probably the illustrious Lord Seanford lived in a shack and was just afraid that Sheila would get acquainted with his cockroach housemates!

Pete frowned. "Quite unusual, such actions... especially for a man with serious intentions. Actually, the opposite behaviour is more common."

"That's how I see it too," Sheila replied gloomily. "I'm really not overly suspicious by nature, rather the opposite. I've already had some very unpleasant experiences with men and I just don't want to be disappointed again."

Jupiter nodded gravely. "Understandable."

"Well, it seemed like a twist of fate that I should come across a team of investigators at this particular time. I want to get some more information about Seanford without him getting the feeling that I'm spying on him. It's not like I want to cause any harm just because I'm a little unsettled." She paused expectantly. "How is it? Can you take the job?"

That's how far it got! Before Jupiter could answer, Bob explained in a businesslike manner: "Well... although we investigate anything, we don't normally do this kind of 'private investigation'."

"But in this case it's only a personal check, so to speak," Jupiter objected. "After all, we don't snoop on relationship matters."

"And what about our other... uh... case?" asked Bob in a miffed tone.

"We don't even know if that's a real case yet," Pete replied. "Besides, a trip to the harbour is not a trip around the world."

Sheila looked up hopefully. "That means you'll help me?"

The First Investigator smiled. "That's exactly what it means."

"Sure, it's a deal. We'll check out your crush," Pete joined in.

Bob gave an incomprehensible grumble. This meeting had really gone fabulously! Not only had Sheila fallen for a pretentious beau—now they were tasked with removing the last doubts about this superman...

"This is great!" Exuberantly, Sheila shook hands with the three of them. "Thank you so much! I'm sure there's a very simple explanation for everything... and then, finally, there will be nothing standing between me and Seanford!"

"That would really be too good to be true," Bob growled softly.

Jupiter picked up a notepad. "Then all we need now is Mr Newman's address."

"Of course, just a moment!" Sheila reached into her handbag and searched around in it a little. "Here, this is his card. He works as a freelance event manager here in Rocky Beach. His address and phone number are on the back."

Pete took the business card and read it aloud:

FunDango—Festivals and More

Seanford Newman

Creative Supervisor

"How impressive..." Bob grumbled ungraciously.

Jupiter looked at the card thoughtfully. "FunDango? In Rocky Beach? Strange, I've never heard of it before."

"Sean has only recently started his own business with this agency," Sheila explained. She glanced at her watch. "Oops, so late already? I really need to get back to Santa Monica! If you have any questions, here's my mobile number and home e-mail address." Another business card changed hands.

Jupiter carefully stowed them away in his trouser pocket. "Fine. We'll be in touch as soon as we have the first results."

Only now did Jupe notice that a small booklet had fallen out of Sheila's handbag and slipped under the garden chair. He picked it up and gave it to her. "Here, you almost lost this."

Sheila beamed. "Thank you so much! That's what you get for carrying half your household stuff around in your handbag. If I could, I'd put my desk in there too!"

Before she put the booklet back in her handbag, the striking cover caught Jupiter's eye
—*Paintings by the Spanish Masters—Magic of Light and Colour*.

"Someone's been working hard for university on the side, I suppose?"

"If only it were..." Sheila waved her hand and sighed. "There's not enough time for my studies at the moment, especially now that Mr Mitchum is working on several projects at once. Also this..."—she pointed to the booklet in her handbag—"is about an exhibition at Mitchum & Ferguson."

"I thought it had to do with our auction," Pete replied with a grin.

"Well, even if the auction has nothing to do with 'Spanish magic' it's bound to be a really great event on Saturday," Sheila said with a smile. "Oh, I just remembered something..." Again she opened her handbag. "I've got a picture of Seanford with me... so you'll know what he looks like right away. Here it is."

"I can't wait to see that." Jupiter accepted the photo and held it so that his friends could also look at it.

Bob intended to take only a brief, emphatically bored look at the photo, but when he recognized the lanky young man in the grey suit leaning in a casual pose against a lamp post, he almost fell backwards.

“No!”

5. The Mysterious Mr Newman

The shock had hit Bob like a sledgehammer. Jupiter and Pete were also surprised, but had controlled themselves. Sheila, on the other hand, had flinched fearfully at Bob's reaction.

"You scared me! What's the matter?" she asked.

Jupiter quickly intervened. "Oh, Bob is terrified by men in grey suits. It's a strange thing he has."

"Exactly," Pete agreed eagerly. "A traumatic experience at a school dance. He has yet to get over it."

"I see." Sheila looked over with a mixture of scepticism and sympathy at Bob, who was now staring silently ahead of him into nothingness. "Sorry, I couldn't have known."

She rose and smoothed the hem of her dress. "Well then, I really must be off. Good luck and thanks again for your help."

Jupiter accompanied her a short distance out of the workshop. "Goodbye, Sheila!" he said.

"And have a good trip!" Pete called out.

Bob, who had sat transfixed in his seat the whole time, not making a sound, whispered in a pressed voice: "Is she out of earshot?"

"Wait..." Jupiter continued to glance outside and waited until she was out the main gate. "Okay, now you can start."

Bob had only been waiting for this.

"Skinny Norris?" he yelled angrily. "Sheila Masters is dating Skinny Norris?"

"Now don't go crazy," Pete tried to placate him. "Maybe it's just an incredible resemblance."

"—Or Skinny has a sympathetic twin brother we never knew about," Jupiter added half-heartedly.

Upset, Bob crushed a harmless plastic cup that was on the workbench. "Nonsense, I can recognize that mug shot blindfolded! I've got to call Sheila right away and tell her she's been taken in by a conniving impostor!"

Bob jumped up, but Pete held his angry friend back with gentle force. "Now wait a minute. Don't you think you're over-reacting a bit?"

"Over-reacting?" Bob stared at him in disbelief. "Pete, Skinny Norris is a menace to society! You could fill a whole room with the trouble that scumbag has caused us!"

Jupiter nodded. "That's true... but before we rush into anything, we should think for a moment. After all, it could be that Skinny actually has a crush on Sheila. Maybe he just wants to make himself more interesting with the made-up name and all that other stuff."

"So what?" Bob shook his head indignantly. "That doesn't change the facts! Our nemesis Skinny Norris is trying to get at Sheila with a barrel of lies! Maybe even to sneak into the gallery through her somehow. It's our duty to let her know about it."

Pete anxiously put a hand on Bob's shoulder. "Calm down first of all. I can't stand Skinny as well—you know that... but I still agree with Jupe's opinion. Before we inform Sheila, we should take a closer look at Skinny."

Jupiter nodded. "Who knows, maybe there really is something to this agent thing. After all, we haven't heard from Skinny in a while. It's possible that he's finally got something together somehow."

"That would be a shocker to me," Bob snapped. "I don't have to remind you that he is the most despicable scoundrel that we have ever had to deal with. His mere existence annoys me."

"Okay, Bob," Pete said in a calm voice. "I can understand your frustrations. In fact, of the three of us, that dirtbag had endangered me the most. The case that struck me the most has to be the 'Island of Death'."

"Just don't remind me of any of our cases with him in it," Bob grumbled.

"There is no doubt that he is a rascal of the highest degree," the First Investigator said. "Of all the times we have faced him, we have come out on top... and this will not be an exception."

"Okay, so the faster we get on with it, the faster we'll get him out of the way," Bob added, "hopefully, for good."

Jupiter reached for the business card and looked at its back. "Guess what? Skinny seems to have moved back to his parents' house. So nothing stands in the way of an exploratory excursion."

Bob showed no reaction.

"Now come on." Pete nudged him in the side. "If it turns out that Skinny is up to any crooked stuff, we can always inform Sheila."

Bob gave a deep sigh. "All right... but I can tell you now that this whole thing stinks to high heaven!"

Jupiter smiled with relief. "If you're right, we'll let you tell Sheila the good news personally."

"So how do we deal with two cases in terms of time?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator glanced at his watch, which was now showing half past four. "Well, first I will ask Uncle Titus what his further plans are. Fortunately, we completed constructing the stage in record time. If he can spare us for a while, I suggest Bob and I pay a little visit to this Mr Newman's agency while you go to the harbour."

"Agreed," Bob said, "but first, I'll check the mobile number on this FunDango card."

He reached for the phone and turned on the loudspeaker. "Let's see who answers."

"Good idea," Pete replied, "but you're not calling using your real name, are you?"

Bob looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes, of course! I say: 'Hello, Skinny, it's your old mate Bob. I hear you're an event manager now, so I was wondering if you'd like to organize Aunt Mathilda's birthday party!'"

Pete raised an eyebrow. "Could it be that you're a bit over-sensitive about the whole Sheila thing?"

"Nonsense," Bob grumbled as he dialled the number. Shortly afterwards, the call signal sounded and after the third ring, the answering machine took over.

An extremely melodic female voice announced: "Good afternoon. You have reached FunDango, the event agency for all your needs. 'With Fundango, you can get on with the show!' ... Unfortunately, our office is currently unmanned, but you are welcome to leave us a message. We will call you back as soon as possible. Thank you very much!"

"Goodness! Talk about cheesy slogans!" Shrugging, Bob hung up the phone without leaving a message.

Jupiter rubbed his chin. "Well, he's got a professional phone answering service anyway... but that doesn't necessarily mean anything, of course."

Bob nodded. "Exactly. After all, I can put out a recording that says something like, uh... 'John Cusack is unfortunately out of town right now and will be back soon.' That doesn't mean I have any connections with John Cusack."

"Right. So we have to find out if the whole thing is just a façade." Jupiter gestured to the phone. "I guess the easiest thing to do will be to leave a message and ask for a call back—about some party or anniversary. Then we'll see what happens."

Pete picked up the phone. "All right. I can give my mobile number—there's no way Skinny knows it. If you two are going to check out his place now, it's probably better if I get the call back."

"Very good!" replied Jupiter. "And if he actually gets in touch about the party, you just tell him that you've already found an alternative in the meantime—in a disguised voice, of course."

Pete grinned. "I'll do just that!"

After Pete, as a certain 'Don Cusack', had left his request on the answering machine, Jupiter asked Uncle Titus if he could manage without his three helpers for a while. Since there was nothing in the works, The Three Investigators separated a little later.

While Pete left for the harbour as planned, Jupiter and Bob went to Skinny's parents' house to look for signs of the ominous event agency.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Bob parked his yellow Beetle two blocks away in a busy shopping street. The enormous heat build-up over the city had fortunately dissipated somewhat in the meantime and the agonizing calm had given way to a gentle northeasterly breeze.

"So here we are again." Bob looked around eagerly. "A visit to Skinny Norris. Hmm... from a distance everything looks the same."

"It's lucky that his neighbour still has such a densely overgrown property. Skinny certainly won't see us behind the bushes."

Crouching slightly, the two stalked a few steps further along the street when a stern voice suddenly made them flinch.

"Hey! What are you hanging around there for?"

An astonishingly obese woman in leggings and a screaming pink tunic looked over at them suspiciously from across the street. Perched on her arm was an obviously freshly coiffed dwarf poodle, yapping its head off enthusiastically.

Jupiter had caught himself in a flash. In a lecturing tone, he replied: "We're not just hanging around here, ma'am, we're having a conversation about the splendour of the flowers of this magnificent 'hemicrania'." He pointed to a particularly colourful bush in front of him. "I don't suppose this is forbidden, is it?"

The pink lady was visibly taken off guard. "Um... no, I guess not." She seemed to be thinking about how she could end this conversation with an admonition after all. "But don't you pick anything off there! That's private property!" she announced with a raised forefinger. Then she turned and trudged back to her house.

The First Investigator breathed a sigh of relief. "Come on, we'd better go to the other side. If this sympathetic lady puts on another performance like that, we'll soon have the whole street as an audience."

"I agree," Bob said, "but tell me—what was that about that 'hemidingsda' just now? Was that really the name of the bush?"

Jupiter grinned amusedly. "Nonsense, that was just the first technical term that came to my mind. 'Hemicrania' is the Latin term for headache, but it sounded all right, didn't it?"

"You bet. You could have appeared at any gardeners' congress looking as serious as you did."

By now they had reached the opposite property and Bob looked cautiously over at the Norris house. "So, what do we do now?"

"I suggest you stroll discreetly to the door and see if there's anything about FunDango."

Bob was quite taken aback by this unusually no-frills plan. "Er... and what if Skinny sees me?"

"No problem. Earlier when I was leaving, I quickly grabbed one of Uncle Titus's old hats." The First Investigator pulled out from his backpack a crumpled bomber hat in a ghastly colour combination of brown and yellow. "If you put this on, your own mother won't even recognize you."

Bob wrinkled his nose. "Well, I should hope so. She won't be able to take the shock! Before that, I could be arrested for crime against fashion!"

Hesitantly, he put on the ridiculous hat and pulled it down just above his eyes. "Well then, keep your fingers crossed!"

Not twenty seconds later, he was back. He did not seem at all pleased about the result of his expedition.

"There's actually a little sign next to the door bell that says: 'FunDango Event Agency'. Not exactly classy, just plastic, but still..." Annoyed, Bob took off the hat. "Now get rid of this fashion accident before someone sees me with it."

"Give it to me, I'll keep it." After Jupiter had put the hat into his backpack, he paced up and down a few steps thoughtfully. "So, either Skinny is really serious about this agency job or the whole thing is part of an extensive deception operation."

"You're still unsure about it? Of course there's something fishy!" Bob made a throwing away hand gesture. "After all, anyone can print a sign like that for themselves these days! That doesn't prove anything!"

Again he felt anger rise up inside him. Skinny being honest? Never, even if there were a hundred company signs hanging next to each other! This impostor was certainly playing a game and Bob would prove it!

"The question is how do we find out what's really behind this," Jupiter said. "There's not much we can do with the results so far."

That was unquestionably true. Bob thoughtfully twirled a small twig between his fingers, then suddenly stopped and peered over a large bush. "I think a window just opened back there! If we sneak over carefully, we might hear something!"

"If that was Skinny at all..."

"That remains to be seen," Bob urged. "Come on, let's hide behind the hibiscus bushes. That way we'll get right under the window without being seen!"

The First Investigator cast one glance towards the driveway, and then he followed his friend into the thicket.

"Well, let's go get that rascal!"

6. In the Clutches of the Gnome

Meanwhile, Pete had long since arrived at the harbour and had already picked up the cooler box with the salmon fillets at Frinton's Fish, which his mother needed for the buffet of a charity party.

Now he stood facing the seafront, breathed in the fresh air and looked out at the mirror-smooth surface of the Pacific Ocean. On the horizon, a tern was lonely circling. In moments like these, the Second Investigator realized how much he loved the sea. For a few seconds, he just stood there and enjoyed the impressive panorama.

Finally, he tore himself away, reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper on which he had written down the address of Gizmo's Castle. 17 Sterling Lane was barely fifty metres away at the end of a winding cul-de-sac. The warped cottage, built of soot-blackened ship planks, looked as if it had seen the storms of several centuries come and go. A huge algae-covered anchor protruded from the earth in front of the entrance.

With a shudder, Pete suddenly imagined that directly below him, at the end of an anchor chain that dropped hundreds of metres into the depths, actually rested the hull of a sailing ship that had long ago been swept into the depths. He quickly banished this creepy thought and opened the massive entrance door of Gizmo's Castle.

The first thing he noticed was that all the shutters were closed. Only a dirty paraffin lamp on the ceiling provided a little light. The chaotic interior of the shop with its shelves reaching up to the ceiling seemed to Pete like the dwelling of an oddball wizard. Everything was stuffed to the brim with the strangest and most mysterious things imaginable—demonic masks, coloured glass balls, bales of cloth, spice jars, ancient maps, eerie figurines, painted wooden statuettes, exotic jewellery, traditional daggers, rusty muskets and, of course, countless maritime collectibles—from antique sextants to a model of a British three-master. Fascinated, the Second Investigator let his gaze wander. No wonder Uncle Titus had liked this shop!

The pervasive smell of musty wood, oil and seaweed hung in the air, but there was something else much more intense. After a brief look around, Pete discovered a shimmering golden bowl in which some kind of incense were obviously smoking away.

At the end of the surprisingly spacious room, was a huge counter. Behind the counter was a life-size statue of Neptune, the Roman sea god—typically portrayed as a tall, bearded man carrying a three-pronged fisherman's spear.

At the counter, sat a wrinkly little man in a rocking chair. Other than him, there was no one else there. The man had a bulbous nose and white chin beard who immediately reminded Pete of a cunning gnome. Behind huge horn-rimmed glasses, two watchful eyes gazed at the newcomer.

Pete presumed that the man was the owner of the shop—perhaps a certain Mr Gizmo, if that was really his name.

The Second Investigator stepped closer and pulled the pack of playing cards out of his pocket. "Good afternoon!" he called out. "Excuse me, did you perhaps sell this pack of cards here recently?"

Mr Gizmo grinned broadly, exposing a few remaining stumps of teeth.

“Yessss...”

His surprisingly high voice resembled the shrill scratching of chalk on a blackboard. Somehow there was something strange and unsettling about it. Nevertheless, Pete wrestled a smile from himself. The visit here seemed to be a complete success. Finally they were getting somewhere with the case!

“Was the buyer by any chance a tall man with a long coat?” Pete asked.

Gizmo continued to grin from ear to ear.

“Nah!”

Pete faltered. “Er... and can you perhaps describe the buyer to me?”

“Nah!”

There was still that annoying grin and a strange glint in his dark beady eyes.

Pete tried not to get irritated, but it was getting harder by the second.

“Not even whether it was a man or a woman?”

“Nah!”

No further explanation—just silence, smoke and grins.

Gradually, Pete became annoyed. ‘Yessss...’ and ‘nah!’—is that all he could say? Still, he had to remain polite. After all, he wanted something from this strange Gizmo and not the other way round.

“Did he or she perhaps want anything else?”

“Yessss...”

The first drops of sweat formed on Pete’s forehead, and it wasn’t because of the temperature. The intense smoke from the bowl made him dizzy... along with the hypnotic look from the old man...

“And would you be so kind as to tell me what that was?”

“Nah.”

His beady eyes flickered.

Pete’s initial good mood had finally faded and given way to a feeling of creeping unease. Something was not right here.

Out of the corner of his eye, he hesitantly glanced to the side. Had the monstrous Neptune moved towards him during the last few seconds? Pete could have sworn that the mouth of the sea god had been firmly closed earlier. Now, however, it was open, as if he was trying to say something.

Nonsense! The Second Investigator bit his lower lip vigorously. He had to pull himself together. He was probably just bothered by the stuffy air, that was all. Straining, he tried to think clearly.

“Do you happen to have... anything from Wild Bill in this shop?”

For a while, Mr Gizmo remained silent with a deadpan expression. Then his grin widened even more.

“Yessss...”

That was at least something, Pete thought. He wouldn’t last much longer in this spooky smoke house. To make matters worse, his left eye had started watering badly because of the smoke. Hastily, he wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

“And may I see it?”

Another long pause. Then a nod.

Leisurely, Gizmo reached behind him into a half-open cupboard, which reminded Pete unpleasantly of an upright coffin because of its strange shape.

While the old man rummaged around in it, the Second Investigator took another nervous look around him. He noticed that it had become noticeably darker in the room... and again he

had the impression that the shiny black sea god had moved a few centimetres in his direction. The dim light of the paraffin lamp cast ghostly dancing shadows on the walls and the eerie wooden statuettes on the shelves suddenly seemed to stare at Pete from tiny beady eyes.

In the meantime, Mr Gizmo had taken something out of the cupboard and placed it on the counter in front of him.

“Herrre!”

Hectically, Pete turned around and saw a worn wide-brimmed hat lying in front of him.

“A cowboy hat? Probably the kind Wild Bill wore?”

“Yessss...”

With a sickening smacking sound, Mr Gizmo licked his cracked lips. A long thread of saliva dripped down the corner of his mouth and his eyes flickered.

The old man no longer seemed odd or funny to Pete, but repulsive and dangerous. The Second Investigator had to fight hard against the overwhelming urge to just grab that shabby hat and run out of the shop.

“And is this for sale?”

“Yessss...”

A dense cloud of haze now enveloped Mr Gizmo’s head, and in the midst of this cloud, Pete blinked distractedly. The old man’s narrow face seemed to change, becoming broader and more misshapen... and more evil-looking.

An ice-cold shiver ran down Pete’s spine. Hastily, he fumbled for the wallet in his back pocket and pulled it out.

“H-how much is it?” he groaned in a trembling voice.

“Twentee... dollaaars...”

The Second Investigator didn’t waste a second thinking about the completely exorbitant price, but grabbed two tens and put them on the counter.

A knobby hand with yellow fingernails reached out of the haze and snatched the money. The old man then leaned forward and said: “Thanksss...”

The world began to spin around Pete. As if in a feverish delirium, he suddenly thought he saw the wrecks of all those ships in front of him, the wood of which must have been used to build this cursed building and whose cargoes had filled the shelves over the centuries. Countless ships and their crews, innocent men, women and children—mercilessly lured to their doom on dark stormy nights by false beacons on the cliffs. They had all been swept into the depths, and those who had managed to save themselves to the longed-for beach had been taken by this horrible gnome.

A gurgling giggle could be heard. Pete wavered as he turned his gaze to the owner. Behind billowing clouds of smoke, Gizmo’s eyes blazed brightly like glowing coals. No, not like coals, but like open fire. It was no longer the grinning face of an old man staring at him out of the fog, but an abysmally ugly grimace that barely had any human features.

Out of the corner of Pete’s eyes, he noticed some movement. He turned and there was Neptune. Now, his mouth was gaping like a red frayed opening in the middle. Shocked, Pete thought he saw the teeth now protruding from the widening mouth like the tines of a dirty rake. The mouth opened wider, as if it was going to bite something.

“Do you want to eat?” the Second Investigator thought he heard Gizmo say.

Pete’s heart almost stopped in horror. The shock had paralysed his whole body.

“Huh? What?” Pete stammered in panic as he continued to keep his eyes on the widening mouth of the sea god. “You’re talking to him?” was all he managed to say.

“No, I was talking to you,” the old man replied. “I asked whether you want a receipt...”

Pete immediately shifted his gaze back to the old man, and saw him smiling and pointing to the hat. Suddenly Gizmo no longer looked frightening at all—just a harmless old man with a bulbous nose and horn-rimmed glasses again.

Then Pete turned back to Neptune—the statue of Neptune... It was just standing there harmlessly—with his mouth closed. Meanwhile, the incense bowl had somehow gone!

“So do you want a receipt?” Gizmo asked again. “—For the hat...”

“N-no thanks!” Pete uttered haltingly as he gradually overcame his dizziness. As if in a trance, he grabbed the cowboy hat with one hand and the cooler box on the floor with the other, turned slowly and walked along the gloomy shelves towards the exit.

When he was holding the door handle in his hand, the croaking voice sounded behind him: “I hope you would come and visit me again soon!”

After the door creaked shut behind him and the warm light of the Californian sun enveloped him again, all fear and tension seemed to fall away from Pete in one fell swoop. He felt as if he had just woken up from a bad dream, the images of which were still lingering. He gratefully sucked the clear sea air into his lungs. Only gradually did his pulse begin to slow down.

The smoke... the horrible incense... there must have been something in them, he was sure of that now—something that had made him step away completely. But why all this? He shook his head in disbelief. Whatever had just happened in there—a team of wild horses would not be able to drag him into that shop of horrors again!

At that moment, his mobile phone rang and the Second Investigator winced. Absent-mindedly, he pulled it out of his pocket. He still felt quite dazed.

“Hello? ... Huh? Don who?” Realizing with surprise who was calling him, Pete quickly lowered his voice and continued: “Yes, yes, that’s right, Don Cusack here... That’s right, I had contacted you about a company anniversary event... I see... Oh, that’s unfortunate, of course... No, don’t bother, I’ll look for another agency myself. Thank you very much for calling!” He hung up and put the mobile phone back in his pocket.

“If that’s not news!” Pete said to himself.

7. Enemy Territory

At the same time, Bob and Jupiter were lying in wait, hidden behind a huge hibiscus bush, under the window of the Norris house.

“It’s really Skinny!” whispered Bob triumphantly. “—Listening to music and talking on the phone. His parents don’t seem to be around.”

Indeed, muffled bass rhythms emanated from the room, but fortunately they were not so loud as to mask the voice of their nemesis. Skinny seemed very upset.

“It’s nonsense! Felicity, you just have to listen carefully! It’s all about the details, and it makes a difference whether you get an S-51 or an S-53! At an angle of over 160 degrees, a 61 will break right through! … Now don’t start this nonsense again—if you think I’m mumbling, then please ask before you talk rubbish! … Stop bitching and exchange the part, got it? I’ll meet you at Chester & Company tonight at 11, and don’t forget the DVDs. I’m bored out of my mind here!” He slammed the phone down. “Why can’t some people listen?”

Jupiter smiled contentedly. “Well, that was quite a lot.”

At that moment, the squawking ring of a mobile phone sounded. Startled, Bob flinched. “Damn! That’s mine!”

“Go! Go somewhere else with that thing!” The First Investigator rowed his arms wildly.

Bob hastily made his way through the undergrowth, trying to be as quiet as possible. If he had managed to get his hand into his tight jeans pocket while running, he would have switched off his mobile phone long ago. But as it was, he first had to put a sufficiently large safe distance between himself and Skinny’s window. When the distance seemed large enough, he paused, gasping, and squeezed out his mobile phone.

“Uh—yes hello? … Oh you, Pete! Do you have to call now of all times? … Yes, I left it on by mistake. What’s so urgent? … Uh-huh… Excuse me? I don’t understand… What? … Yes… Yes, okay, I’ll let Jupe know. I’ll see you later.”

While he pocketed the mobile phone, Jupiter pushed his way between two unruly branches, panting. Annoyed, the First Investigator shook his head.

“Bob! Surely we should have learned from the past that—”

“—Ringing mobile phones don’t mix with stake-outs, I get it. I just forgot about it. Pete was also quite irritated because he actually just wanted to leave me a voicemail.” He hesitated and gestured questioningly over to the house. “So, did Skinny notice anything?”

Breathing heavily, Jupiter wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Didn’t look like it. Luckily, after the phone call, Skinny turned the music up even louder. What did Pete want?”

“I didn’t quite understand the first part—something about evil grimaces and a creepy gnome. He seems to be pretty much upset. Well, but the second part was clearer.”

“Namely?”

“We definitely know now that there’s something fishy about the Skinny thing. A Miss Talbot called and told Pete that they couldn’t handle our request because the company was loaded with jobs at the moment.”

“And at the same time Skinny is complaining to this Felicity that he’s bored out of his mind! Well, it looks like the whole thing is indeed a big hoax, and the sign on the door is probably just a ruse in case someone checks on his agency.”

Bob nodded grimly. "So Skinny is still the same—up to his tricks as usual!"

Just then there was a crack in the thicket and a lanky figure burst out from between the trees, with a baseball bat in his right hand. "I'll just take that as a compliment, you bomber hat bozo!"

"Skinny!" The completely surprised Jupiter could not bring himself to say more.

"Well, if it isn't Fatman and his sidekick, Bobbin the Boy Blunder. Do you really think I didn't notice when a mobile phone rings right outside my open window? How about bringing a brass band along on your next snooping expedition? By the way, where's the third superhero? Still stuck in the phone booth changing?"

"Save the mockery, Skinny," retorted Jupiter, who had recovered from his surprise. "We've seen through your plot!"

"Oh yeah?" Skinny grinned challengingly. "May I ask what you are babbling about?"

"Sure, but for that, it would probably be better if you invited us in. The whole neighbourhood doesn't have to know what we have to talk about."

Skinny puffed contemptuously. "You must have a fever! I'm not thinking of letting you in."

Bob took a step forward. "Then let's call Sheila right now and tell her the latest about Seanford Newman!"

Skinny turned pale. Uncertain, he lowered the baseball bat. All arrogance and superiority had vanished. "All right, if that's the way it is... I mean, we can talk to each other for a minute..."

Jupiter smiled cheerfully. "You see, that sounds much friendlier already."

Grumpily, Skinny pointed over to the house. "Come on, then!"

"Gladly!" Bob beamed in complete elation of triumph.

As they walked back to the house, Skinny muttered to himself with his lips pressed together angrily. "What a wretch!"

In feigned astonishment, the First Investigator raised his left eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Annoyed, Skinny pointed to the brick staircase. "I said watch your step!"

In the meantime, Pete had dropped off the cooler box at home and returned to the salvage yard. He would have preferred to stay at home and watch some harmless TV show to distract himself from his dark thoughts of walking figureheads and maniacal gnomes. However, he knew that it was now important to take a close look at the hard-won booty.

As Bob and Jupiter were not expected until later, he went to Uncle Titus who was putting the finishing touches to a large poster saying 'Welcome!' He seemed happy about his creation.

"What's that nice thing you brought?" Titus asked. "A cowboy hat?"

"That's right." Pete laid the hat on the workbench. "Possibly a puzzle piece in a strange mystery." He preferred to keep his uncanny experience at Gizmo's Castle to himself for the moment. "So what does your trained eye say about this gem? Does it date back to the Wild West?"

Uncle Titus took the hat and looked at it from all sides. "Well, in any case it is a so-called Plainsman. Because of its deep crown, this hat was particularly suitable for treks through flat, windy territory and was not only popular with cowboys."

"What you don't know..." Pete marvelled.

Uncle Titus smiled. "After all these years in this business, you've pretty much had your hands on everything... but to get back to your question..." He patted a little dust from the

brim of the hat. "As worn-out as it looks, this thing could easily be a hundred and fifty years old, but a real cowboy hat would be made of beaver or rabbit fur, not low-grade felt like this one. Besides, the stitching here on the side is clearly made by machine."

The Second Investigator sighed. "So it could well be tourist kitsch... I thought so."

"What's the deal with this hat anyway? You said it was part of a puzzle?"

"Yes, and a pretty idiotic puzzle if you ask me," Pete explained, while scowling at the 'twentee... dollaars' he had plunked down for it. "Somehow this cowboy hat is supposed to have something to do with Wild Bill. You know, that—"

"—Famous gunslinger," added Uncle Titus. "Well, given Wild Bill's legendary cunningness, I would imagine that your puzzle is not about the hat itself, but—"

"—Something hidden in it!" Pete exclaimed and an idea had just occurred to him. "And I think I already know where to look!"

He felt around the inside of the cowboy hat and actually found what he was looking for after a short while. "There you go! An age-old trick—hidden paper behind the sweatband." He looked at the small piece of paper, puzzled.

"So, what does it say?" Titus asked.

Confused, Pete handed him the paper. "Only one number: '10'."

Uncle Titus scratched thoughtfully behind his ear. "'10'? Hmm... I'm sorry, but I'll have to pass." He paused for a moment, then smiled. "—But I know someone who can tell you more... guaranteed."

"Really? Who?"

"Abner Hunnicutt."

"I beg your pardon?" gasped Pete. "Crazy Abner? He's by far your most annoying customer and he's always coming in with some worthless junk!"

"That's true, but at the same time he's a huge fan of American history, especially the Wild West. Last month, for example, he tried to sell me General Custer's 'original leather boots', which he supposedly got cheap at a garage sale. The stuff was pure junk, of course, but the details he could tell me about Custer's career and the Battle of the Little Bighorn were truly amazing."

"And you think he's also familiar with the history of Wild Bill?"

"For sure. I once went to his house because I had to complain about some 'guaranteed genuine Cheyenne necklaces' he had sold me shortly before. That was in the early days, when I didn't yet know Abner's strange understanding of merchandise quality. Anyway, his living room is like a second-hand bookshop—books, souvenirs, replica items, pictures, and posters on the history of the pioneer era and the Wild West are everywhere."

Pete cast a thoughtful glance at the cowboy hat. The Three Investigators were tasked with solving a strange western mystery and across the street lived a cranky codger whose greatest hobby was the Wild West. Could this just be a coincidence?

At that moment, the familiar voice of Aunt Mathilda sounded from afar: "Tituuus! Customers for you!"

With an apologetic gesture, Uncle Titus pointed outside. "Well, duty calls me." He rolled down the sleeves of his shirt and adjusted the collar. "If I were you, I'd go over to Abner's right now. He's always happy to have visitors and I'm sure he can help you with Wild Bill."

"I'll do that," Pete replied, "and thanks again for the expert information on the Plainsman!"

"You're welcome. Good luck with your puzzle!"

After Uncle Titus had gone off in the direction of the customers, Pete reviewed the strange events of the last two hours in his mind.

What did it all mean?

8. An Upper Hand on the Enemy

Meanwhile, Skinny led his uninvited visitors to his richly untidy kitchen, which smelled of coffee and stale beer. His parents actually seemed to have been out of the house for some time. As if casually, Skinny pulled the door to the adjoining living room shut. He seemed to want to avoid the two investigators having a look in the other rooms.

Annoyed, he pointed to two modern tubular steel chairs. "You can plant yourselves there. So, now I'd like to know what's going on with Sheila."

"That's exactly what I want you to tell us, and no stupid excuses," Jupiter replied sternly. "Sheila is our client. We know you are interested in her and you used a false name and a false job to do so."

With a frown, Bob appraised the arch-enemy. "Spit it out! What are you up to?"

Skinny looked up at the ceiling in anguish. "Oh man, why am I punished with these snoopers!"

Jupiter leaned forward. "Skinny! The truth!"

"What more do you want to hear? You already know the truth! I fell for her three weeks ago at a singles party! Am I supposed to show you my invitation card now, or what?"

Bob waved his hand impatiently. "We're not interested in your party life, but what's all this nonsense about Seanford Newman?"

Skinny gave a long sigh before answering. Even the last of his typical arrogance was gone and he sounded very meek.

"That's exactly the point, I had thought of all this much earlier. I've been to parties like that a few times—always just for a bit of fun and under a false name. I never had anything serious in mind. Actually, I just went there to make fun of all the weird guys."

"What a laudable pastime," Jupiter replied in a biting undertone, "but then you met Sheila."

"Exactly. I saw her come in the door and suddenly it clicked... and the best thing about it, she told me she felt the same as well! I never expected that in my life! Stupidly, another girl had introduced me to Sheila as 'Seanford Newman'—event manager and art lover."

The First Investigator nodded. "So your own lie came back as a boomerang."

"You could say that." Skinny sighed again and looked down at the floor. "Actually, I wanted to clear everything up, but I was afraid that she would then immediately give me the slip. After all..."

"What?" asked Bob sharply.

Skinny gave him an annoyed look. "Goodness, do you want me to paint the whole picture for you? I don't have a glamorous life! And my run-ins with the police isn't exactly great conversation material!" He put his hands down and shook his head. "Why should I kid myself? If I were Skinny Norris, I wouldn't stand a chance with Sheila."

Annoyed, Jupiter slammed the fake business card down on the kitchen table. "So you cooked up a bunch of lies!"

"I know," Skinny muttered contritely, "but one thing led to another and I didn't know what else to do."

Jupiter pointed to the table. "That's why you made fake business cards, put up a fake company name plate and an answering machine service that does not take in any jobs. After all, you had to keep up the false appearances." The hint of a grin flitted across his face. "At least you stayed true to your initial letters—'SN'."

Skinny did not respond but smiled faintly.

Bob flicked a bottle cap off the edge of the table in a belligerent manner. "So, the whole thing had to do with Sheila and you didn't know anything about Mitchum & Ferguson!"

"Mitchum & Ferguson?" Skinny raised her eyebrows in irritation. "Oh, that funny art shop."

"One of the most prestigious art galleries in all of California, to be precise," Jupiter corrected him.

"Fine by me." Skinny waved it off. "Anyway, I first heard about it at the party when Sheila told me about her job... but by then I had such a crush on her that she could have been an FBI agent for all I cared."

"It's all right—we get it!" Bob hissed irritably. He clenched his fists in his trouser pockets. The past few minutes had gone completely differently from what he had expected and hoped for. A repentant Skinny with sincere feelings did not suit him at all. Where was the sly crook he wanted to gallantly protect Sheila from? Bob thought hard. Something had to be found to expose Skinny after all.

Then something suddenly occurred to Bob. "What was that earlier on your phone call? The thing with the S-51?" he asked.

Skinny hesitated, puzzled. "You've heard that too? That was all about oversized buffet plates—nothing special."

"Excuse me?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

"Well, buffet plates. A friend of mine is supposed to get them for me so that I can put some decoration in the room when Sheila comes to visit soon."

"To make it look like you really have material for your budding FunDango agency," added the First Investigator. "Anyway, you can't keep up this game of hide-and-seek forever! It's all going to come out eventually!"

"You're right," Skinny conceded. "I do plan to tell her the truth... sometime, when the time is right."

Bob narrowed his eyes. His gaze was ice-cold. "How about right now?"

Horrified, Skinny pulled up. "Impossible! That... that's not possible! I have to break it to her gently, bit by bit. If I call her now and tell her that almost everything about me is a lie, she'll hang up faster than I can say 'FunDango'!"

He looked pleadingly from Bob to Jupiter. "Please, give me another day or two to get things done properly... at least until Saturday."

"Hmm..." the First Investigator murmured thoughtfully.

"It's really not that much," Skinny continued. "I'm just asking you to be fair!"

"Fair?" Bob burst out. "You of all people talk about fairness? You don't even know what that word means!"

Skinny took a deep breath and bowed his head. It was obvious how difficult the following sentences were for him. "I understand that you only see the bad in me. We really had an awful time together... and I guess a lot of it was my fault."

Jupiter cleared his throat loudly.

"All right—most of it," Skinny admitted, "but this isn't about any old feuds or unfinished business... it's about me not wanting to lose Sheila." He wrung his hands helplessly. "She is

by far the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life. Maybe I don't deserve to be happy with her at all... but please let that be her decision and not my past."

Jupiter and Bob had no response to that.

"Come on—if you want an apology, I'll apologize, and if you want my promise that I'll change, I'll do that as well... but give me this one chance so I can prove that I'm serious about Sheila!"

"Well, when you look at it that way..." Jupiter looked over at Bob. "So Bob, what do you think?"

Bob looked outside with a stony expression on his face. He would have liked to laugh in Skinny's face, call Sheila and blow the whistle. Then it would have been over between her and this pompous rascal! But a quiet voice inside him told him that this pompous rascal had just been very brave and that his honest words deserved respect.

"All right," he said barely audibly.

Jupiter nodded. "Okay, we'll give you two days' grace, Skinny—not a day longer. We'll inform Sheila by Saturday evening at the latest, regardless of whether you've already confessed to her or not!"

"Thanks a lot, guys!" cried Skinny in boundless relief. "I'll never forget you guys for this. Honest!"

"Yeah well, let's wait and see," Bob muttered and stood up. "Come on, Jupe."

On his way out, Bob turned to Skinny and said in a calm, firm tone: "But if we find out that you are still pulling some kind of stunt with Sheila, then you're in for a treat."

When they were outside, Jupiter put his hand on Bob's shoulder. "I know how hard this was for you just now, but believe me, it was the right decision."

Lost in thought, Bob kicked a pebble aside. "I really hope you're right."

9. The ‘10’ Puzzle

On the way to Mr Hunnicutt’s house, Pete had thought of several ways to proceed. In the end, he decided to just ask his question straightforwardly and then make his way back as quickly as possible so as not to get caught in any dubious sales pitches.

After he rang the bell, it took only a few seconds before the door creaked open and an astonished Abner Hunnicutt appeared at the doorway.

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon, sorry to disturb you, but I could use your help in answering a small historical question.”

Hunnicutt hesitated briefly, then his expression brightened. “Oh, I recognize you now. You’re one of Jupiter’s friends, aren’t you?”

“That’s right, Pete Crenshaw is my name.” He shook the old man’s hand.

“Then please come in. I’m happy to help in any way I can. It’s only natural between neighbours, especially since I get on so well with Jupiter’s uncle. We are business colleagues, you know?”

“That’s right, I’ve heard about that,” Pete replied politely and had to stifle a grin.

Mr Hunnicutt led the Second Investigator through a small hallway into his living room, which actually looked like an old, heavily overloaded bookshop. Pete had to think of Gizmo’s Castle for a moment, because there was considerable chaos here too, but the atmosphere was incomparably friendlier and more pleasant. This was not least due to the large picture window through which the rays of the afternoon sun fell and bathed the room in golden light. Pete was also relieved to find that Mr Hunnicutt was obviously not a fan of tobacco or other smoking materials.

Smiling, his host offered him a seat on a plush wine-red armchair. Mr Hunnicutt sat down opposite him on a richly decorated leather-covered wooden chair that looked as if Viking princes had sat on it in ancient times. More likely, however, it had come from some discount furniture store.

Hunnicutt made an inviting gesture. “So tell me how I can be of help to you.”

“Well, it’s like this...” Pete pulled the small piece of paper out of his pocket. “My friends and I are working on some kind of puzzle and it’s about Wild Bill at the moment.”

“Aha, that sounds interesting.”

“The trouble is that our only clue at the moment is this piece of paper here.” Pete handed the piece of paper to Mr Hunnicutt. He looked at it briefly and then grinned.

“I can indeed help you with that. The ‘ten’ or number ‘10’ was the name of the saloon where Wild Bill was shot dead during his last poker game.”

“Really?” asked Pete. “That’s a quick solution to the puzzle!”

“Yes, yes, I know that for sure,” Mr Hunnicutt continued. “The killer was the buffalo hunter and gold digger Jack McCall, but he went by the false name of ‘Bill Sutherland’. It is assumed that he committed the deed out of anger at having lost all his money to Wild Bill the day before in a poker game, at the same ‘Saloon No 10’.”

“And does the saloon still exist?”

"The original building was burnt down in 1879 along with pretty much the whole town. It was then called 'Nuttal & Mann's Saloon No 10'. Later it was rebuilt at a location that some say is not the exact location of the original. In fact, nobody can really be sure.

"I have even been there myself three years ago when I did a tour of the whole country lasting several weeks. Nowadays, they even put on a Wild Bill show specially for tourists. Absolutely great, I can tell you!" He smiled pensively. "Going on a tour of the famous places of the Wild West era is the realization of an old childhood dream."

The Second Investigator frowned. "And where is this famous saloon? Is it anywhere near here?"

"Near here?" Mr Hunnicutt laughed gleefully. "Wild Bill died in Deadwood, Lawrence County. That's in South Dakota—if you consider that near here!"

"Well, then I guess this tip won't do us too much good," Pete muttered. "A trip to the north-central region of the country is definitely beyond our budget... or is there maybe another place called Deadwood here in California?"

"Not that I know of, sorry."

"It's all right." The Second Investigator wrestled a smile from himself. "Besides, I wouldn't have got this far in the first place without your knowledge. I'll think of something." He glanced at his watch. "I have to get going now. Thanks again for your help!"

"You're leaving already?" Hunnicutt was visibly disappointed. "I could show you a beautifully preserved leather waistcoat that Wild Bill wore during his time as a cavalry scout. I would let you have it for an absolute bargain price!" He started to rummage in a large box.

"That's extremely kind of you, but for that, you'll have to talk to Mr Jones," Pete demonstratively held out his right hand to Hunnicutt as a parting gesture to stop him from digging any further.

"Oh, you're really in a hurry, but if you need any more advice or guaranteed historical material from the time of the Wild West, then feel free to turn to me with confidence."

"Will do. Goodbye, Mr Hunnicutt."

Back on the street, Pete thought hard about everything he could think of that is associated with the number '10'—the Ten Commandments, ten fingers, decathlon, the ten apostles—no, that was twelve! Concentrate, Pete!

Besides, he didn't just need any famous '10', but one that was here locally or at least nearby.

And then he suddenly had a thought—No 10 Downing Street! Not the residence of the British Prime Minister in London, of course, but a bronze sculpture in Palisades Park to the north. A local artist named Randolph Downing had donated this work to the city a few years ago. The actual title of the sculpture was 'Gate of the South', but because of the strange frame shape and the tempting opportunity for a flat pun, it had been named '10 Downing Street' by a reporter in the local press. This name had been so memorable that Downing's work had since been known throughout Rocky Beach only by its new title or simply as 'The 10'.

That was not the only indication that Pete was on the right track. Just then, he remembered a recreation ground that directly bordered the park to the west. It was called Sutherland Square! The Second Investigator smiled. Hurray for the Western expert Abner Hunnicutt! So the name of the saloon and the alias of Wild Bill's murderer crossed at the sculpture—if that wasn't a hot lead!

Immediately, Pete set off to visit Rocky Beach's most famous '10'. It took him only a few minutes by bike to reach the park and shortly afterwards, he was standing in front of the imposing 'Gate of the South'.

Now he wondered how likely it was that the mysterious puzzle initiator had hidden his next clue in such a busy public place. After all, the park was a popular destination especially for families with children, as well as for joggers and sunbathers who enjoyed nature here at lunchtime or after work.

Pete looked around. Even now, in the immediate vicinity of the bronze sculpture, several girls and boys were happily romping across the extensive lawn, playing tag or throwing Frisbee discs. It was not exactly the ideal place for secret hiding places, thought the Second Investigator. Perhaps the puzzle initiator had been here at night to leave something on the sculpture. In any case, a brief investigation couldn't hurt.

Indeed, Pete's intuition was rewarded. After a brief inconspicuous scan of the 'gate', he discovered a small square object taped under a latch-like protrusion. After he made sure that no one was looking in his direction, he carefully detached the tiny package and quickly let it disappear into his trouser pocket. The Second Investigator decided not to open the package there and then, at least not in a public place.

Pete rode briskly back to the salvage yard and retreated to the outdoor workshop, where he carefully unwound the tape. Astonished, he looked at the jet-black matchbox that emerged, on the front of which was written in white letters: 'The Town Too Tough to Die'.

Pete paused. A town that is too tough to die? Pretty strange slogan...

He turned the matchbox over to check if there was anything on the back that might have contained a hint, but he was disappointed. There was no more clues as to what the strange phrase referred to. The inside offered nothing as well, just some matches, each with a red sulphur head. There was nothing unusual here.

Pete wondered if this was just a creation of the puzzle initiator. What town would advertise that it was 'too tough to die'? It was more likely that some Western story was behind it again... but how could he find out which one? If he went back to Mr Hunnicutt now, the man would end up adopting him.

Completely lost in thought, Pete turned the matchbox back and forth between his fingers. "Where do I go from here?" he asked himself.

Out of a sudden, Pete realized a huge shadow was slowly looming behind his back. Before he managed to turn around, a deep voice growled: "Puzzle solved?"

The Second Investigator stumbled in fright against the wall shelf and knocked over a large cup containing drill bits, which fell to the ground clattering like a shiny silver torrent. Completely flabbergasted, he turned around. "Hey, you gave me a fright! I nearly had a heart attack!"

The giant was standing at the entrance to the workshop. Not in the least impressed, he took a step towards Pete. "I never ask a question twice," he growled.

"Uh, I... I don't know how much progress we've made," Pete replied quickly. "You haven't even told us what it's all about yet."

"It's a puzzle," the giant growled.

The Second Investigator hesitated briefly. "Yes, that's clear, but where exactly is the puzzle supposed to lead to and who gave it to you in the first place?"

The giant showed no signs of answering these questions so Pete had to keep talking out of necessity: "Well, there was a lead to a shop at the harbour. There I bought a cowboy hat with a note hidden inside... and that note in turn led me to a sculpture where this was found." He held out the matchbox to him.

"Hmm..." The giant took the matchbox, looked at it closely, took out the matches and then pushed them back in. Then he nodded briefly. "Good! Here..." He pulled a fifty-dollar note from the inside pocket of his coat and placed it on the workbench. Defensively, Pete raised his hand.

"No, thank you very much. The Three Investigators do not take a fee as a matter of principle. As soon as my friend Jupe returns, he will give you the first fifty back—"

"Your job is not yet finished," the giant interrupted him. "Solve the puzzle. I'll be back the day after tomorrow. You have until then." With that he tossed the matchbox to the Second Investigator, turned around and left.

Pete burst out: "You can't just impose any deadlines on us without even telling us who you are!"

The giant paused and slowly turned around. The look with which he now gave Pete could have derailed a train.

"Nobody messes with a McLaury." He bent down and removed a long object from a wheelbarrow loaded with scrap metal. "See this?"

The Second Investigator's breath caught in his throat. "The handlebars of a motorbike," he said with difficulty.

With frightening ease, the giant bent the massive pole in half.

"Not any more," he growled and dropped the thing.

"I don't believe it..." Pete whispered, stunned.

The giant folded his huge arms. "It took me ages to track down the star... and you will help me find it, understand? If you don't start working on it, I won't wait till Saturday... I'll come back tonight..."

With his paw-like right hand, he pointed at Pete.

"—To get you!"

10. Star Seeker

After a silent drive, Jupiter and Bob arrived back at the salvage yard a little later. There, Pete was already waiting for them impatiently. He excitedly told them about the horror experience with Mr Gizmo, the clue in the cowboy hat, the conversation with Mr Hunnicutt, the matchbox from the park and, of course, his latest encounter with the sinister giant. For further deliberation, the three retreated to Headquarters—armed with a jug filled to the brim with delicious lemonade—courtesy of Aunt Mathilda.

“Okay, that was quite a lot at once now,” Jupiter noted. “So let’s try to sort things out a bit. First, there is our giant, possibly named McLaury, who handed us the prepared pack of cards. This pack contains a hidden reference to the Western legend Wild Bill. Later, Pete learns from Mr Hunnicutt that the gunman who shot Wild Bill while he was playing poker was called Jack McCall. Question—could it be that the giant have said ‘McCall’ and not ‘McLaury’?”

Pete shook his head. “No, it was definitely McLaury. I’ve already looked in the phone book too, but no luck. There’s no one by that name here in Rocky Beach.”

“Okay, even though we cannot be certain about this,” Jupe said. “Anyway, let’s continue... The clue leads to Gizmo’s Castle, where Pete learns that shortly before, the puzzle initiator acquired this deck of cards. Whether it was man or woman, we don’t know.”

“This puzzle initiator is therefore most likely responsible for the McLaury puzzles—that is, for the pack of cards, the hat and the matchbox,” Bob reflected.

“Also it must be remembered that it was Mr Hunnicutt who provided the decisive tip to find the hiding place of the matchbox,” Jupiter added.

Bob looked up. “Are you saying that maybe this clue wasn’t a coincidence at all, but planned?”

“I don’t want to go that far at this stage, but this perplexing overlap of Western mysteries on the one hand and Western knowledge on the other is, after all, striking to say the least,” Jupe reasoned. “Thus the question arises whether we should put a question mark over Abner Hunnicutt as a possible suspect for the role of the mysterious puzzle initiator.”

“In my opinion, we can skip that,” Pete argued. “Sure, Mr Hunnicutt was extremely helpful, but he didn’t hand me the solution on a silver platter. He was able to provide me with several valuable facts, but when we got stuck on Deadwood, he had to pass. In any case, I only came up with the idea of the Downing sculpture later.”

“Then, unfortunately, the background of the puzzle initiator remains in the dark,” the First Investigator stated. “All we know is that he or she, for some reason, confronted our giant with strange puzzles from the Wild West era.”

“—Which we now have to do the work,” Pete added. “I don’t get it. If it took that giant so long to find the star’s trail, why didn’t he continue to look for it?”

Jupiter stumbled. “Did he actually say that?”

“Yes, he did. He said it took him ages to track down the star... or something like that anyway.”

“So we were wrong with our original guess,” Bob concluded. “The star is not a clue, it’s the target!”

“So it seems,” the First Investigator agreed. “That makes it all the more important to clarify what ‘star’ we are actually looking for.”

“Since everything so far has somehow revolved around the Wild West, it could well be a sheriff’s star,” Pete surmised.

“Or maybe ‘star’ doesn’t refer to a specific object at all, but we have to approach the matter linguistically,” Bob pondered. “There’s this new Italian ice cream place that opened on Porter Avenue last month called ‘Stella Cadente’.”

“—Which translates as ‘shooting star’,” Jupiter agreed. “However, beyond that, there would be dozens of other possibilities revolving around the ‘star’ sign or metaphor—from the US flag to the Star Palace Shopping Centre on Earl Boulevard. No, fellas—with further reference, we’re going in circles here.” He sighed. “Crazy... just completely crazy, all of this...”

Pete nodded. “You can say that again.” He stroked his hair nervously. “What’s even crazier, though, is that Gizmo the gnome has given me some really bad hallucinations with his toxic smoke.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “Well, this occurrence is indeed most puzzling. As you suspected, the incense obviously contained some intoxicating substance that produced this change in perception. There is a whole range of possibilities.”

“But then Gizmo would have had to be high himself,” Pete objected. “After all, he inhaled the stuff too!”

The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders. “You said the incense bowl was placed very close to you, so maybe that’s why. It could just as well be that Mr Gizmo is simply immune to the incense. We can’t judge all that in retrospect, and we certainly can’t prove it. In fact, all he did was sell you a hat and spread the smoke. There was no real physical threat, was there?”

“No, not that,” Pete admitted, “but the fear was still real for me!”

“Right, Pete,” Jupiter agreed with him. “Mr Gizmo specifically wanted to scare you. The only question is why?”

“Not only that,” Bob said. “It’s also unclear why this McLaury wants his puzzle solved so quickly. Is he perhaps being pressured by the puzzle initiator?”

“Who do you think would be pressuring this giant?” asked Pete sceptically. “No, I’m more guessing that there’s some deadline going on in the background involving this strange star.”

“Speculation after speculation and not a hint of a conclusive motive in sight,” Jupiter muttered and leaned back in his chair, brooding.

“Should we even pursue this case?” asked Bob doubtfully. “The way this guy is acting, he’s not a client, he’s a threat.”

“I completely agree with you,” the First Investigator replied. “However, I have the feeling that there is something significant at stake here. Therefore, I would be in favour of continuing to work on the case for the time being, but keeping completely open how we will deal with the results later. In any case, obligations to our client are no longer a priority from now on.”

“Agreed,” Pete replied, “but until then, we’ll act as if we’re dutifully investigating on his behalf, okay? I would gladly do without another house call from King Kong!”

“Don’t worry,” Jupiter reassured him. “For the time being, everything will continue as normal. If it gets dangerous, we can always get backup.”

Bob smiled. “Against an Inspector Cotta, even King Kong will remain affable.”

"Then I am reassured." Pete looked up with relief. "So, now finally tell me how it went with Skinny. Did you find out anything?"

In an instant, Bob's expression darkened.

"Er, yes, you could say that," Jupiter replied.

Pete now listened intently to the First Investigator's report and was astonished at the open confession of their arch-enemy. "I never thought that Skinny had any feelings for anyone or anything, but romantic feelings? That's something else! ... Can it be that you are not quite convinced by the story?"

Jupiter frowned and poured himself another glass of lemonade. "I'm not completely clear about that myself yet. Most of it sounds quite plausible. With the wealth of information we have, Skinny didn't have much choice but to spill the beans. However, I suspect that the whole story is not just about romantic feelings."

Bob was taken aback. "You haven't said a word about that until now!"

"I can't tell Skinny that yet, otherwise the whole situation would probably have tipped over," Jupiter explained. "The mood was on a knife edge anyway. Besides, it's a hunch at best, nothing more."

"And what kind of hunch exactly?" asked Pete.

"The whole sob story about a 'tragic youth' who has to lie for love," Jupe said. "It was all a tad over the top."

"Yes, it was over the top," Bob confirmed. "Skinny almost cried!"

Pete sighed. "Don't you think you're getting a little carried away? After all, we've already experienced so much unbelievable rubbish with Skinny that we can hardly be impartial. So we automatically assume something devious, even though he might really mean it this time."

Jupiter nodded. "Our common history naturally increases the general scepticism... but that's not it alone."

"What else was there?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator reflected. "I felt there was something not genuine in his body language—too many little gestures that seemed contrived and theatrical. Maybe I'm wrong, but something tells me we should keep our eyes open."

Pete frowned thoughtfully. "If Skinny is really up to something, it can only be about the gallery, can't it?"

"At the very least, Sheila would undoubtedly be ideal for getting inside information on Mitchum & Ferguson," Jupiter added. "However, the fact that Skinny has obviously hardly dealt with art issues so far speaks against this, otherwise, his blunder with Rembrandt would certainly not have happened. Nevertheless, there is of course the possibility that he is waiting for an opportunity to do a crooked thing."

"And what does that mean for us now?" Bob asked. "We gave Skinny our word that we'd give him until Saturday to tell Sheila the truth."

"Correct, but I didn't promise that we would sit tight until then. I suggest we see what Mr Norris is up to at Chester & Company tonight. He's supposed to meet that Felicity girl there at eleven."

"Chester & Company?" asked Pete. "That's that little construction company on Old Malibu Road, isn't it?"

"Right." Jupiter stood up and looked intently at the map of Rocky Beach. "I can't wait to see what our event manager has in mind."

11. Flaming Tombstone

Before The Three Investigators plunged into further investigations, Jupiter first asked Aunt Mathilda about the status of the auction preparations, since most of the planned activities for the rest of the day had been fulfilled and Uncle Titus was leaving to visit a customer.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob was back at Headquarters again. There they examined the strange matchbox in detail, but came to no new conclusions. No one could make any sense of the slogan either. Therefore, Bob, who was responsible for records and research, sat down at the computer to search the Internet for any information that might be available. Contrary to expectations, it only took a few moments before he was able to announce a result.

“Fellas, I found it! ‘The town too tough to die’ is actually a very official slogan!”

“Really? What kind of town does such crazy advertising?” asked Pete, dumbfounded.

“Let me tell you, this crazy town is located in Cochise County in southern Arizona and has the resounding name of Tombstone!”

“Tombstone? That’s where that legendary Gunfight at the O.K. Corral took place, right?” Jupiter enquired.

“Absolutely right, Jupe,” Bob replied as he skimmed the text. “To be exact, the most famous shoot-out of the Wild West, happened on 26 October 1881. On one side was three of the famous Earp brothers—Virgil, Wyatt, and Morgan—and Doc Holliday. On the other side was a loosely organized gang of outlaws known as ‘The Cowboys’. All are described in countless books and filmed umpteen times.”

“Wyatt Earp is the most famous marshal in America,” Jupiter commented.

Bob added: “I’d like to point out that Wyatt is often erroneously regarded as the central figure in the gunfight, when his more-experienced brother Virgil was then the Tombstone town marshal and deputy US marshal.”

“So after the gunslinger Wild Bill, we have links to more legends of the Wild West...” Jupe said, “but what are we supposed to do with it?”

“—Or are we going on a wild goose chase through the history of the Wild West?” Pete asked.

“Did the two of them have anything to do with each other?” Jupe pondered.

“—Or maybe they met in Tombstone?” Pete asked.

Bob shook his head. “It doesn’t look like it. At least it doesn’t say anything about it here... but wait...” He paused, puzzled. “Oh, my goodness! I just found something else!”

“What? Maybe a reference to Buffalo Bill?” asked Jupiter with a grin.

“Not that, but you’ll still be amazed!” Bob replied. “I have just discovered that in the gunfight, the names of two of The Cowboys were—wait for this... Frank and Tom McLaury!”

“That can’t be!” Pete snapped. “So our giant is—”

“—Possibly a descendant of the infamous Tombstone outlaws,” Jupiter added excitedly. “Bob, what else is there about this gunfight?”

“Quite a lot and yet very little,” Bob replied as he clicked on more links. “The way I see it, the events could never be clarified. Although over the decades, a vast amount of literature

and later movies have appeared about the event, most of it probably belonged in the category of hero worship rather than factual reporting.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pete.

“Well,” Jupiter interjected, “at that time it was quite common to exaggerate sensational events such as spectacular duels with bandits, or even clashes during the Indian wars to downright battles between good and evil—on the one hand, law and order; on the other, lawlessness and anarchy.”

Pete nodded. “I see... but I guess it wasn’t quite that simple.”

“—Just as nothing is clearly black or white,” Jupiter stated. “It’s no different today than it was back then. However, at the time of the conquest of the West, there was a particularly strong need for glorious heroic figures that the young nation could look up to. Especially on the already fully populated East Coast, people were eager for new adventure stories about the brave pioneers of the Wild West... and they were diligently supplied—mostly by eager journalists or travelling chroniclers who wrote for penny dreadfuls or daily newspapers. This is how the great legends and later the famous western movies about Davy Crockett, Wild Bill, Jesse James or Wyatt Earp came into being—which every child in America still knows and loves today.”

“—Although much of it is more fiction than truth,” Pete concluded thoughtfully.

Jupiter sighed with a smile. “That’s the way it is with heroic figures. They are loved for their perceived heroic actions, not for their dark sides.”

Bob took a big sip of lemonade. “Man, Jupe, that was a mean sociology lecture on the foundations of our nation. But in Tombstone, I guess it went something like this—to this day, most people still think that the gunfight was a classic battle between right and wrong. The main members of The Cowboys were the ruthless Clantons and the McLaurys, accused of cattle rustling, stagecoach robbery and murder. On the other side were the upright lawmen who bravely defended their town against the bandits.”

“But there must be another version, right?” asked Jupiter.

“That’s right. It is undisputed that The Cowboys violated the weapons ban, which ultimately triggered the gunfight... but the actual conflict seems to have reached a crisis long before that. I haven’t been able to plough through all the details yet, of course, but there seem to be solid indications that the Earps were involved in some shady dealings, for example in the gambling business. They are said to have ruthlessly exploited their position of power in the town to gain advantages over their competitors.”

He scrolled down to a new passage of text. “Well, and that’s why there are interpretations that the gunfight at Tombstone was only to get rid of unwelcome rivals.”

Pete let out an astonished whistle. “That actually sounds quite different from the familiar version. How did it actually turn out?”

“Billy Clanton, Frank and Tom McLaury died. Virgil, Morgan, and Holliday were wounded in the gunfight, but Wyatt was unharmed. The feud itself continued, but then that had nothing to do with Tombstone.”

Frowning, Pete looked at the matchbox. “So, what do you think? Whether our giant is after something that would prove what really happened back then at the gunfight?”

“It’s hard to imagine,” Jupiter replied. “After all, there already seem to be numerous versions of what happened, but hardly anyone is interested. A new piece of evidence wouldn’t change that. No, I think it’s more a personal thing going on between ‘Giant McLaury’ and the mysterious puzzle initiator.”

“Only we don’t have a single starting point for this,” Bob pointed out. “So we have to stick with what we have—Tombstone, Wyatt Earp and the McLaurys.” He exhaled loudly

and glanced at the screen. "Information from the Internet is all well and good, but you also always run the risk of getting bogged down somewhere. So I'm going to resort to some old-fashioned research when I get home. I remember that Dad has a book on the history of the Wild West in his study. I'm sure there's something in there about Tombstone." He glanced at his watch. "Anyway, it's too late for a visit to the library today."

"That's right." Jupiter yawned exhaustedly. "Besides, each of us should get some rest after dinner to gather strength for our night mission to Chester."

Pete stood up. "Okay, then let's say half past ten here at the salvage yard? I'll pick you up."

"All right!" Bob took the matchbox and placed it in the drawer of the desk. Then he tapped his index finger thoughtfully against his chin. "By the way, have you noticed that our giant's pin now makes sense too? This flaming tombstone basically means nothing other than —"

"—Tombstone in flames," Jupiter added with a sombre expression. "You can hardly express your hatred of a town more clearly."

Just as The Three Investigators were about to leave Headquarters, the phone rang. Jupiter picked it up and switched on the loudspeaker.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Good evening, Jupiter! It's me," a cheerful voice announced on the other end.

"Hello, Sheila! Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Actually, I just wanted to ask if you might have found out anything yet."

Jupiter hesitated. "Nothing concrete yet, but I think we will have clarity shortly. We'll let you know as soon as we have results."

"That's nice, thank you very much." There was a short pause. "The thing is, Seanford called earlier and invited me to lunch tomorrow. He wants to pick me up and take me out for something real big, with all the trimmings."

"That's just fine," the First Investigator replied and gave his colleagues a meaningful look. "Maybe something new will come out of this meeting. You can call us afterwards and tell us how it went."

"All right, I'll do that. See you tomorrow then!"

"See you tomorrow!" Jupiter hung up. "What do you know about that? Apparently Skinny actually keeps his word."

Bob scowled out through the open door into the dark tunnel. "I'll believe that when I hear it from Sheila tomorrow..."

12. Phantom Cowboy

As agreed, The Three Investigators met back at the salvage yard at half past ten on the dot and then went in Pete's MG to Old Malibu Road. Once there, they parked in a small side street at the foot of a lush eucalyptus grove and stalked the Chester & Company site.

The construction company was surrounded by a high wall, but the imposing steel gate stood open. Since the nearest street lamp was a good fifteen metres away and there were no lights on the premises, The Three Investigators were able to risk a look through the driveway under the cover of darkness.

"Everything looks deserted," whispered Bob. "Only the little building at the back has some lights on."

Jupiter nodded. "Probably Chester—waiting for his visitors."

"There's a car coming!" hissed Pete excitedly.

The three of them quickly hid in a narrow niche between the wall and a small rubbish container full of construction rubble.

Soon, the street was bathed in cold light by two glaring cones of headlights and a little later, a green Honda stopped right next to the driveway.

"Anyway, the Honda doesn't belong to Skinny," Jupiter noted. "A red-haired woman gets out."

"—And goes to the office," Bob added. "That'll be that Felicity, I suppose."

The First Investigator nodded. "So all that's missing is our Mr Newman."

"Do you think there is a guard dog in the premises?" Bob asked.

"I don't think so," Jupiter replied. "Then Chester would hardly have left the gate open... but of course, we have to be careful. Guard dogs are not to be trifled with, as we all know."

The Three Investigators remained in their hiding place quietly and waited patiently.

Then Bob glanced at his watch in surprise. "Hmm... almost ten minutes past eleven. Where is that Skinny? No cars passed by here after the Honda and there's no other entrance besides this one."

Suddenly Jupiter paused. "Wait! We are fools!"

Pete looked at him in amazement. "What's wrong now?"

"Nobody said Skinny had to park out here on the street!" Jupe stood up and crept to the gate and peeked in. Then he went back to his friends and excitedly announced: "Guess what, fellas? Skinny's sports car is already inside—parked opposite the little building!"

Bob grabbed his forehead. "And we've been staring at the street all this time and didn't even notice that he was already here!"

"Quick now, over to the office!" murmured Jupiter. "Maybe it's not too late to hear something!"

The Second Investigator glanced uncertainly back and forth between the gate and the street. "Don't you think maybe someone should stay here and be on the lookout?"

Jupiter grinned. "How good it is that at least someone here thinks of our safety. I assume you want to sacrifice yourself for this honourable task."

"My keen eagle eye will watch over you," Pete replied with a broad smile.

Winking, Bob nudged him in the side. "Then make sure you secure our way back!"

In the faint glow of the narrow crescent moon, Jupiter and Bob ran crouched to the small office building. Behind a cement mixer, they found enough cover not to be seen if someone suddenly came outside.

"Too bad, no open windows," Bob noted disappointedly.

"Yes, but the door doesn't seem very solid. Let's just listen. Oh, before I forget..." He turned to his friend. "Did you put your phone on silent mode?"

Grinning, Bob tapped his pocket. "Better. I've shut it down."

"Then we're ready to go."

The two listened intently at the door. In fact, they could clearly distinguish the voices of three people.

At the moment, Felicity seemed to be speaking: "... The information you wanted is all here..."

Now Skinny's voice rang out: "Have you included the information about the working environment?"

"Yes," Felicity said. "The entire workplace, including the ground surface. There are no bumps or uneven slopes, inclines or embankments. Just flat hard ground."

"Well bravo!" whispered Jupiter angrily. "I guess we've already missed quite a bit."

"What about the power lines and obstructions such as trees, eaves or balconies?" a deep male voice said, presumably Mr Chester.

"No obstructions," Felicity replied.

There was a rustling. After a short pause, Chester was heard again. "Good... What's the height measured from the ground to its maximum reach? And also the horizontal reach?"

"It's in the sketch here," Felicity replied.

"Hmm..." Chester muttered. "Okay! Looks pretty straight forward... Now we come to the loading capacity..."

"I have that information for you," Skinny now took the floor. "Here are my estimates..."

"Hmm..." Chester muttered again. "Is that all there is?"

"Yes," Skinny replied.

"Also pretty straight forward," Chester commented.

Now a short snort and a strange throaty growl could be heard.

"It's all right, old boy. We'll do our rounds again later," Chester murmured amicably.

Jupiter turned to Bob. "So there really is a guard dog, but at least he's in there."

"Thank goodness!" Bob whispered. "—But he could still sense us out here. We just have to be careful not to alert him!"

After a short pause, Chester took the floor again: "Based on your requirements, I would recommend the Peak Drifter. It fits what you want exactly. However, I have to get my technician to carry out a full assessment, especially the hydraulics and safety features."

"Great," Skinny said. "When can you get it ready?"

"Well, I think I should have it up and running tomorrow by half past five at the latest."

At that moment, Bob frantically tapped the First Investigator on the shoulder. "Jupe!"

"Man, are you trying to scare me to death? What's wrong?"

"I think something just moved back there by the excavator!"

Jupiter rolled his eyes impatiently. "Could you be a bit more precise?"

"Well, there was a scuffle and also a shadow, I think."

"What do you mean you think?"

"I can hardly see anything in this darkness, and besides, it all happened so fast... but something was there, for sure! To the right of the big garage, between the excavator and the bulldozer."

Jupiter looked in the direction indicated, but could see nothing. "It can't be the dog. Maybe a stray cat?"

"I don't think so."

"Cat or rat—we need to focus here!"

Meanwhile, Pete had first made a detour to Felicity's Honda and then retreated to a favourable observation position. From there, he could keep an eye on the Chester property.

Suddenly, the Second Investigator thought he detected movement at the far end of the compound. He quietly stood up and crept a few metres along the wall. Then he stood on his tiptoes and peered cautiously over. The shock suddenly caught in his throat.

"Oh no!"

In the office, Felicity took the floor again: "So who is going to operate this?"

"I am assigning an experienced and licensed operator to do it," Chester said. "It's all included in the fee."

"Logical..." Skinny replied, "after all, it's not a lawnmower."

Outside, Bob was getting more and more restless. He tugged at Jupiter's shirt.

"I am now one hundred percent sure that there is something back there. Against the light from the street lamp, I could clearly see a movement and that was definitely not a cat!"

"Oh, and why not?"

"No cat is that big!"

"Then it's just some neighbour's dog. As long as he remains so pleasantly silent, I have no problem with that." Reluctantly, Jupiter pressed his ear to the door again.

Inside, they just agreed on a new meeting. "Okay, I think that settles the most important thing," Skinny said. "So if everyone agrees, we'll come back tomorrow evening around half past five."

"Half past five is okay," Chester agreed. "Everything will be ready by then."

At that second, Bob froze and pointed to the side with a trembling arm. "This... this can't be happening!"

Irritated, Jupiter turned around. He too had to look twice to convince himself that his senses were not playing tricks on him. Next to the boom of the excavator towering high into the night sky suddenly stood a broad-legged figure on whose head the sweeping brim of a cowboy hat was clearly visible... and in his hands...

"Is he holding a rifle?" breathed Bob.

Jupiter grabbed him by the sleeve. "Do you want to ask him? Go on, get out of here!"

They ran as fast as they could. Looking back, Bob realized in panic that the dark figure now had his arms outstretched and was obviously aiming at them.

Just as Bob was expecting to hear the first shot behind him, the office door suddenly banged open and an angry voice called out: "Kaiser! Get them!"

The furious barking that now shattered the silence of the night left no doubt that Kaiser must be a huge dog... and this snarling beast was now chasing after Jupiter and Bob!

It was a very unequal race. No matter how fast they rushed to the entrance, they had no chance against the speed of the onrushing monster, especially for the highly non-athletic Jupiter. Any hope of escape seemed to be in vain.

“Well, Jupiter Jones,” it ran through the First Investigator’s head, “you’ve taken on cunning thieves, wily crooks, brutal thugs and ruthless gangsters halfway around the world, and then you end up as a midnight goulash for a construction site dog!”

But just as he thought he could feel the greedy panting of the beast on his neck, an engine suddenly howled.

“It’s Pete!” shouted Bob hoarsely.

Like a thundering fury, the MG now raced up from the darkness, turned in a breakneck manoeuvre directly in front of the gate and the back door was torn open.

Bob promptly dived into the back seat of the car, followed by Jupiter. A split-second before the mighty Rottweiler reached the car, Pete jammed on the accelerator with the back door still open. Within the next second, Jupiter frantically reached out to the door handle and pulled it to slam the door shut.

Only when they had already turned the corner with squealing tyres did Jupe and Bob manage to sigh with relief. Panting, Bob looked out through the rear window. There was no sign of Kaiser or the phantom cowboy.

“That... was so... close!” groaned Jupiter, completely out of breath.

Bob nodded, panting. “I’ve never seen such a... huge dog... before. He would have torn us to pieces!” Again he directed his gaze backwards. “Do you think that Chester or Skinny recognized us?”

“I hope not. After all, we were already a good distance away when they came out...” He looked gratefully towards the driver’s seat. “—And luckily Pete reacted in a flash.”

The Second Investigator grinned. “You can see how good it is when someone secures your way back!”

After this very turbulent night outing, Jupiter decided to postpone their mission evaluation until the following morning so that they could get a well-deserved night’s rest.

Before that, however, he and Bob enlightened their rescuer about the strange technical conversation that Skinny and Felicity had had with Mr Chester. However, everyone was too exhausted to think about it now.

13. Serpent of the Incas

The next morning, a light thunderstorm unloaded over Rocky Beach, but without providing any noticeable cooling.

As early as nine o'clock, Pete and Bob arrived at the salvage yard, where Jupiter and a visibly tense Uncle Titus urgently needed their help in securing a large canopy.

When the canopy was firmly lashed down and Uncle Titus was just considering whether the auctioneer's stage had better be moved back half a metre, he was summoned to the yard office by Aunt Mathilda for a phone call.

The Three Investigators took the opportunity for a short break, sat down on the fabric-covered edge of the stage and discussed the events of the previous night. Only now did Pete learn that his two colleagues had not only run from Mr Chester's guard dog, but also from an armed phantom cowboy. His reaction was alarming.

"What? You've got to be kidding! I thought the guy I saw was the night watchman! And now you're telling me you were threatened by a phantom cowboy?"

"Take it easy, Pete," Jupiter placated. "No one said anything about a phantom or any other paranormal creature. Besides, it really wouldn't have done any good to tell you that last night."

"Exactly," Bob agreed. "You would have just got unnecessarily upset and had bad dreams later."

Pete bowed in mock humility. "Oh, thank you for your consideration, but my dreams are currently reserved exclusively for blood-thirsty gnomes and psychopathic giants, so don't worry about that!"

"Maybe my news will bring you some brighter thoughts," Bob tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. "I went through my father's book at breakfast today and after a while I actually found what I was looking for."

"Oh yeah?" the Second Investigator listened up. "Anything new about the gunfight at Tombstone?"

"Much better. I finally found out what mysterious 'star' our giant is looking for!"

Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That sounds great! Tell us!"

"I'm on it!" Bob, meanwhile, had pulled out his notebook and was flicking to the right place. "First of all, after the gunfight there were several court hearings in which the question of guilt was to be clarified. The Earps and Doc Holliday were charged for the murder of Clanton and the McLaury brothers. In the end, the trials ended in acquittal, but considerable doubt remained, especially among the people of Tombstone. One small detail is particularly noteworthy here..." Bob paused for a moment and looked amusedly into the eager faces of his colleagues.

It was all taking too long for Jupiter. "If you expect us to throw a parade in your honour first, I'll have to disappoint you!"

"Here we go... So, in the course of the proceedings, a strange allegation was made by one of the witnesses questioned. It had nothing to do with the actual charge and I only found it by chance in a small side paragraph."

Pete was also beginning to get impatient. "Namely?"

“Well, according to the allegation, Wyatt Earp unlawfully appropriated an item from the dead Frank McLaury after the gunfight—namely, a solid gold amulet that McLaury was alleged to have worn around his neck on a leather strap.”

“Let me guess,” the First Investigator interrupted him with a smile. “This amulet didn’t happen to be in the shape of a... star?”

“Bingo! To be precise, an amulet featuring a star and the head of a serpent in the centre. The amulet had probably been in the McLaury family for a long time. It was supposedly dated back to the time of the Spanish conquistadors.”

“So maybe looted items from the campaigns against the Incas or Aztecs,” Jupiter pondered.

“Not maybe, but for sure. Wait...” Bob turned a page. “You see, I came across a very insightful chronicler’s article. The title is: ‘The Serpent of the Incas’. According to this source, the Serpent Star, along with numerous other pieces of jewellery, was stolen from a temple in the Peruvian Inca city of Cajas. It was stolen by soldiers of the Spanish navigator and conqueror Hernando de Soto.”

“Fabulous...” Pete murmured.

“De Soto was a companion and direct deputy of the notorious Francisco Pizarro, who destroyed the empire of the last Inca emperor Atahualpa in 1532.”

Jupiter nodded, impressed. “De Soto and Pizarro—now we are getting somewhere with this puzzle!”

“My goodness, such a famous amulet must be worth an insane amount today,” Pete marvelled.

Bob nodded. “Certainly at that time too. Although nothing could be proven to Earp, the Serpent Star remained missing and probably never reappeared.”

“—And now Giant McLaury is after this Star!” Pete added.

“That’s right,” the First Investigator agreed. “At least all the circumstantial evidence points to it. Moreover, I tend to believe that the puzzle initiator also wants to get hold of the Star.”

“You think he doesn’t know the solution to the puzzles himself?” asked Bob with an astonished expression.

“Let’s put it this way—I think it’s unlikely that he or she is doing these puzzles just for the sake of doing them, and is handing over the treasure to Giant McLaury at the end without hesitation. Rather, I think that the puzzle initiator has somehow stumbled upon this trail of puzzles and is pushing McLaury forward so as not to have to make an appearance himself.”

“And McLaury in turn hires us to do the dirty work for him,” Pete added.

“That’s right,” Jupiter agreed. He plucked thoughtfully at a folding rule. “How that fits in with that phantom cowboy from last night, though, is beyond me. I wonder if that was our client himself in the end.”

“It’s possible, of course,” Bob replied. “His size could not be estimated in the darkness. Maybe he wanted to make it clear to us that we should only work on his case.”

“Or it was the walking ghost of that Frank McLaury who has been looking for his amulet for more than a hundred years...” Pete murmured with a sombre expression.

“I don’t want to offend you,” Jupiter had to stifle a laugh, “but from a purely rational point of view, I’m leaning more towards Option A. Besides, this ghost would be in the wrong place with us at the moment anyway. We still lack a new clue for our next stage.” He knocked some sawdust off his jeans. “In any case, very good work, Bob! Thanks to your thorough research, we now know at least the goal of these Western puzzles.”

"Thank you, thank you! But we mustn't forget that we also have unfinished business with Skinny. That nightly meeting at Chester's sounded very suspicious."

"I couldn't agree more," Jupiter said. "Something seems to be going on and we're definitely going to... oh, here comes Uncle Titus."

Pete sighed. "Well, let's get to work!"

The Second Investigator was proved right. The three friends and Uncle Titus spent the next three quarters of an hour setting up the seats for the auction. Thanks to the simple folding construction, this was not much trouble. Then, under the expert and noisy guidance of Aunt Mathilda, they started to clean and decorate the entire square.

The highlight was a gigantic two-by-three-metre poster directly above the stage, which read in dark blue letters:

*The Jones Salvage Yard & Steve Mitchum present:
THE OLD CONTINENT
Exclusive Artwork and Decorative Rarities from Europe.*

Secure Yourself a Piece of History by Auction!

Jupiter looked sceptically from the poster over to his uncle. "Exclusive rarities?"

"A little exaggeration is part of the game if you want to attract attention," Uncle Titus replied with a smile.

"That's the expert talking!" Aunt Mathilda teased him.

After the place was shining in new splendour, the public address system still had to be installed. Jupiter took care of that, as he was very technically gifted and had already solved numerous electronic problems. Everything went smoothly and the team was able to enjoy a delicious lunch at half past twelve on the dot.

There was a huge bowl of macaroni casserole that Aunt Mathilda had already prepared in the morning. Jupiter took a bite as usual, but his mind was obviously somewhere else. "Uncle Titus," he asked between bites, "do you happen to know what a 'Peak Drifter' is?"

After a moment's thought, Uncle Titus shook his head. "No, sorry. Do you want me to make enquiries somewhere for you?"

"No need," Bob intervened, "I'll check it on the Internet later. I'm sure I'll find something there."

Meanwhile, Pete took a third helping of the macaroni. "Simply fabulous, Mrs Jones! This is by far the best casserole I've ever had!"

Aunt Mathilda beamed. "I can't let my hard-working helpers starve, and of course there's dessert—not cherry pie because of the heat, but ice cream!"

Jupiter's eyes lit up. "Three cheers for Aunt Mathilda!"

14. The Green Cabinet

The afternoon was at the free disposal of The Three Investigators, unless any unforeseen complications arose.

Equipped with delicious chocolate-vanilla-strawberry ice-cream sundaes, the three retreated to Headquarters for further case discussion. There, Pete and Jupiter settled into the comfortable sofa with pleasure, while Bob sat down at the computer.

“So, I’m going to do some more research. Let’s see if I can find something about the Peak Drifter.”

“By the way, I remembered something else,” Pete spoke up with his mouth full. “After the escape action yesterday, I had completely forgotten about it. When you sneaked to the office, I took a look in Felicity’s Honda. There was a folded brochure on the passenger seat. I couldn’t make out much, but the heading was ‘Green Cabinet’. Underneath it was written in pen a four-digit number: ‘1230’.”

“Green Cabinet?” Bob listened up. “Somehow that tells me something.”

The First Investigator lapped the last bit of ice cream from his cup with relish. “We’ll sort that out too. The best thing is to add the previous—”

At that moment, the phone rang. He picked up the handset and activated the loudspeaker. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hello Jupiter, this is Sheila!”

“Sheila, nice of you to call! May I ask how your meeting went?”

“Let’s put it this way...” Her uncertainty was clearly audible. “There were some pretty strange moments.”

Jupiter glanced around briefly. “Oh yeah? In what way?”

“Now I’m curious,” Bob whispered expectantly.

“At the beginning, everything was quite normal. Seanford was funny and gallant as always, but then...”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know either, but at some point the conversation shifted completely to Mr Mitchum’s gallery and a project that was being exhibited there.”

“Excuse me?” hissed Bob angrily.

Jupiter signalled him to be quiet with a gruff hand gesture. “I see... and what is that about?”

“A show of works on modernist object art—a really great exhibition with many museum loans from all over America, for example, works by Louise Nevelson and Edward Kienholz.”

“And this sudden interest from Seanford surprised you?”

Sheila hesitated sheepishly. “Well, it wasn’t directly unpleasant for me. I’m glad he’s interested in my work, of course. He just couldn’t get away from the subject. At one point I really thought he might as well have gone out with Mr Mitchum for a conversation like that.”

“So he should...” Bob murmured, stunned.

Jupiter had to make an effort to continue sounding matter-of-fact and calm. “I see. Well, maybe Seanford just wants to empathize more with your work environment. I’m sure it will all get sorted out next time.”

"Maybe you're right," Sheila replied, a little more reassured. "Our next meeting won't be until the beginning of next week at the earliest. Over the weekend, he's busy with FunDango at a big event." Her smile was audible even. "Things seem to be going really well with his agency."

Bob raised both his arms in utter disbelief.

"Congratulations are in order," Jupiter replied. "Well, first of all, thank you very much for the call! We'll be in touch as soon as there's any news."

"All right. See you then!"

No sooner had the First Investigator hung up the phone than Bob started ranting. "That's the last straw! That lying weasel wants to break into the exhibition at Mitchum & Ferguson! That's what it's been all about!"

Jupiter also seemed surprised. "That's actually what it looks like."

"Now I remember where I heard the name 'Green Cabinet,'" Bob continued, agitated. "It's from an article that a colleague of my father's wrote about this exhibition! Wait a minute..." He turned back to the computer and hastily typed in some keywords. "The exhibition is still ongoing, there should be..."

Pete looked at him in confusion. "What?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute... There, I've got it! Mitchum & Ferguson, *Galerie du Modernisme*... So, where is it now... ah, here: 'The Green Cabinet is a special elongated case made of bulletproof glass in which the most precious exhibits are presented to the public.' The insurance value is... over two million dollars!"

After this incredible sum, there was silence for a moment. Then Jupiter whistled softly through his teeth. "Two million dollars! Let me see... 'The security precautions at this most exclusive exhibition of works in recent years meet the highest quality standards. Just to reach the exhibition room on the second floor, you have to go through three monitored security controls...' and so on and so forth."

Pete shook his head in disbelief. "Well, I wouldn't put it past Skinny, but this is way out of his league, isn't it? He would never get into this building!"

"True, certainly not in the normal way, but maybe..." Bob typed something again.

"What are you looking for now?" Pete asked.

"The actual reason of my research! Hmm... no, there's nothing to be found here. So let's try narrowing down the term..."

Only the clacking of the keys could be heard in the tense silence that followed, until Bob suddenly let out a cry of triumph that made Pete cringe.

"Bingo! Hold on to your hats, fellas. Mr Norris is really bringing out the heavy artillery. According to this construction and special vehicles info page, the 'Peak Drifter' is an aerial work platform!"

"What's that?" Pete wondered.

"Specifically, it is a truck with a hydraulic hoist for raising and lowering a safety cage for transporting people to work on utility poles," Bob explained.

"Oh! A truck-mounted cherry picker!" Pete remarked.

Jupiter's jaw almost dropped. "That's what I call a direct approach. Skinny isn't even planning on going through all the security areas inside the building! He wants to break in through the second floor window!"

"Madness!" Pete wavered between astonishment and complete confusion. "That would be—the heist of the century in Santa Monica!" He hesitated thoughtfully. "But... wouldn't it be rather stupid of him to go through with the whole thing now? Surely he can figure that after the break-in at Mitchum's, we'll immediately put one and one together."

"Right," agreed the First Investigator, "and that's why he's going to make a run for it as soon as the heist is over. After all, he has cleverly bought himself a window of opportunity. He knew that revealing his false name too soon would jeopardize the whole plan!"

Bob nodded. "That's right! He was hell-bent on us keeping our mouths shut until Saturday."

"From this I deduce that the foray is scheduled past midnight today, at 12:30 am sharp."

"And how do you get this time?" Pete wondered.

"Think about the number that was written on the brochure."

Pete snapped his fingers. "'1230'—I understand!"

"As far as we know, that is at least the most logical hypothesis. In summary, this means... today at half past five, pick up the truck; seven hours later, break into the gallery. After that, it's goodbye, Seanford Newman, and goodbye, Skinny Norris!"

"Unbelievable," Bob muttered.

The Second Investigator, however, did not seem quite convinced yet. "I'm sorry, but I still can't imagine that he's up to such a big thing. Skinny has really messed up a lot in the past, but this..."

"The dimension of this plan is indeed considerable," Jupiter admitted. "However, we don't know who else is involved. At the moment we only have Felicity and Chester on the list, but we can assume that other people are also involved. Skinny needs the right contacts just to sell such a hot commodity. Since such well-known works are not for sale on the art market, he will probably already have one or more private clients in waiting."

Pete looked at him with suspiciously narrowed eyes. "Let me guess—to find all this out, you want to lie in wait tonight and catch Skinny in the act!"

An adventurous smile played around Jupiter's lips. "I see we are in agreement once again."

"And what about Sheila?" Bob interjected. Inside him, a tiny spark of hope had been beginning to glimmer again for a few minutes. "Surely we must tell her that Skinny has been taking advantage of her all this time!"

"Of course we have to inform her, but not right away. It is possible that she will react rashly and throw everything at Skinny. Then he and his accomplices would be warned."

"Right, I hadn't thought of that at all. So we'll tell her on Saturday when it's all over."

"... On Saturday, when it's all over." Pete frowned. "Maybe I'm seeing ghosts, but Giant McLaury gave us a deadline of Saturday too, didn't he? Strange coincidence, don't you think?"

Jupiter's eyes widened. "Or anything but a coincidence... Pete, I think you're actually on the right track!"

15. A False Game

The Second Investigator looked at Jupiter, puzzled. “Are you sure? I was just saying that.”

“How could I have missed that!” Jupiter was beside himself. “Let’s recall, Giant McLaury turned up at pretty much the same time as the whole Skinny thing started rolling, and that would mean... Quick, Bob—give me that matchbox again!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Hastily, Bob opened the drawer and handed the matchbox to Jupiter. “Here you are... but we’ve already examined it thoroughly a few times. There was nothing inside!”

“If my theory is correct, there must be something there!” Jupe asserted.

“Maybe you’ll tell us what your theory is in the first place,” Pete suggested.

“It’s just a matter of logical deduction,” Jupiter announced. “If we consider the possibility that there is a connection between Skinny and Giant McLaury, then the causal motivation must first be elucidated. In this respect, our previous considerations have unfortunately been extremely deficient.”

Pete grimaced demonstratively. “—And what would that mean in normal human language?”

“There is a saying: ‘When you hear hoof beats, think of horses, not zebras’,” Jupiter said. “Since horses are much more common than zebras, the sound of hoof beats would almost certainly be from a horse.”

“Uh...” Pete had lost the thread somewhere between ‘causal motivation’ and ‘hoof beats’.

“It means that when searching for an explanation, you should always consider obvious possibilities before thinking about more unlikely options,” Jupiter continued and waved his hands impatiently. “It’s quite simple—Giant McLaury is our zebra!”

“I see...” Bob didn’t really seem to be able to follow either.

“Think about it, fellas,” Jupe continued. “We’ve been assuming up until now that this mysterious giant wants to recover an ancient Incan amulet belonging to his ancestor who was shot by Wyatt Earp. Where does he expect the amulet to turn up? Here in Rocky Beach, of all places? ... Instead, we could have just come up with the idea that the whole absurd story is nothing but a red herring!”

“Sheesh!” Pete muttered in annoyance. “In the first place, instead of a story of horses and zebras, why can’t you just say that it was a red herring? So before you bring in any more animals, can I ask what does Skinny have to do with Giant McLaury?”

“My guess at this point is that Skinny was the originator of this whole mystery story!” Jupe said. “I think of it this way—somehow our favourite enemy over the past few days overheard that Sheila had become suspicious of him. Moreover, he knew that his girlfriend had been in contact with us for some time because of the auction. He probably feared she might let us in on her doubts, which was what actually happened.”

“And that’s why Skinny sent that giant after us?” Bob asked.

“A pretty simple scheme—Giant McLaury should first intimidate us properly and then keep us busy with the wacky puzzle story. It’s hard to imagine a better distraction.”

“Then Gizmo the gnome would also have to be in on it,” the Second Investigator added.

"Most definitely," Jupiter confirmed. "His creepy act is to convince us that our search for a mysterious 'star' is about something big."

"It's quite a hassle, isn't it?" Pete commented.

"There's a lot at stake for Skinny," Jupiter replied. "Compared to the aim of his burglary plan, this effort seemed justified to him. After all, he couldn't have kept the three of us busy for forty-eight hours with a runaway cat."

"Okay, but what does all this have to do with this matchbox?" Pete asked.

"I am looking for the final confirmation of my theory," Jupe continued, "and I am sure that..." Jupiter had meanwhile dumped the matches on the desk and was examining the bottom of the matchbox with pointed fingers. "I need a paper knife..."

Pete gave it to him. Very carefully, the First Investigator now made a small incision. Then he pushed the tip of the knife into the slit and triumphantly flipped the loose bottom piece upwards. "Here it is! There is something written here:"

It is not the man from Monmouth who will point to the answer, but whom he rode with into the hills of eternity. ECR, Friday at midnight.

"The 'man from Monmouth'? Who is that?" Pete wondered. "—And the 'hills of eternity'. Sounds rather strange. What is this all about?"

"If it means anything, I can tell you that Monmouth, Illinois, is the birthplace of Wyatt Earp," Bob replied.

"Excellent, Bob!" There was a flash in Jupiter's eyes. "Then the person 'whom he rode with' could mean Earp's wife!"

"The only question is which one, as there were several of them." Bob picked up the computer mouse again and clicked through to historical records of the famous marshal. Hastily he skimmed the lines until he found what he was looking for.

"So, here's the short version—Wyatt Earp's first wife died of typhoid shortly after their wedding, and he left his second wife in 1882 for Josephine Marcus. Wyatt was with her till he died. Wait... here: 'A crucial factor in building Wyatt Earp's legend was that he survived all the gunfights unharmed and subsequently lived to the age of 80 in 1929. The urn containing the ashes of his wife Josephine, who died in 1944, was buried next to his remains.'"

"Very good. So that's one part cleared up," Jupiter stated with satisfaction. "Next is to find out what is meant by 'ECR'."

Pete frowned. "Electronic Cash Register? Engine Control Room? That's hardly what it's supposed to mean."

"I agree," Bob said. "There is no end to it if we just randomly guess..."

"There must be something else," muttered the First Investigator. "ECR should be a place—a place where something happens on Friday at midnight."

Pete couldn't stay on the sofa any longer and he leaned over the computer screen tensely. "What was the exact text from the matchbox?"

"Wait a minute... 'It is not the man from Monmouth who will point to the answer, but whom he rode with into the hills of eternity. ECR, Friday at midnight.'," Bob read aloud.

A euphoric grin spread across Pete's face. "I think I have the solution then."

"What is it?" asked Bob, puzzled.

"We now know which woman we are talking about, so all we need is the place where Earp rode with her 'into eternity'."

"I see!" exclaimed Jupiter. "You think it means their burial place?"

"Exactly." Pete pointed to the web page. "You just missed the little caption here on the left: 'The grave of Wyatt Earp and Josephine Marcus is at the Hills of Eternity Memorial Park in Colma, California.'"

"Hills of Eternity! Pete, you're an ace!" Bob exclaimed.

Pete grinned. "That's not all. Look here..." He pointed further down the web page. "The address of the cemetery is 1301 El Camino Real—ECR!"

"This is really a great achievement!" Jupiter added joyfully.

The next moment, the First Investigator sank into thoughtful silence, then he announced with a determined face: "So now there is no longer any doubt. Giant McLaury is acting on behalf of Skinny with the sole aim of luring us away as far as possible tonight. Because while we would have been waiting for something big happening at midnight at Wyatt Earp's grave in Colma, Skinny would have been quietly breaking into Mitchum & Ferguson!"

"Strange," Pete said. "Colma is near San Francisco. Even if we fell for this, would Skinny even expect us to make a trip there?"

"It doesn't matter now," Jupe decided. "We are not going to Colma. We will be at Santa Monica waiting for him."

Bob slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. "Let's give this burglar king a run for his money!"

16. Ride into the Unknown

So it was a done deal. After The Three Investigators had discussed their upcoming night mission and then helped Uncle Titus to carry out some final acoustic tests, they separated from each other for the time being at around 7 pm.

A good four hours later, they were in Pete's MG on the highway towards Santa Monica.

"Is everything okay with Inspector Cotta?" Bob asked.

"Yes, he is informed," Jupiter confirmed. "He was a bit grumpy at first, but that's how we know him." In feigned excitement, he imitated Cotta's annoyed voice: "In the meantime, we could actually set up a dedicated line for you, of course with direct access to all data and mission plans! Or better still, you could move in here with me! I'm sure there's enough room in my office cupboard for your headquarters!"

Pete smiled compassionately. "Sometimes you can understand the poor man—as often as we interfere with his work."

"That may be so. Nevertheless, our intervention has proven to be correct and necessary in most cases so far," replied the First Investigator.

"Sure," Bob agreed, "but that doesn't make it any easier for Cotta. What did you actually agree with him?"

"The plan is as follows—two hours ago, the inspector informed his colleagues in Santa Monica about the expected break-in at Mitchum & Ferguson. Therefore, at 11 pm, a couple of plain-clothes police officers will be there in the vicinity. As soon as Skinny arrives and proceeds with his plan, it won't take two minutes for more patrol cars to get there."

"Good to know." Pete was visibly relieved. "I was afraid you were going to do everything on your own again."

"That would be a bit too risky even for me, given the magnitude of the situation," Jupiter pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "By the way, I had time earlier to get to the bottom of another thing. Skinny told us, didn't he, that the so-called 'S-51' refers to oversized buffet plates?"

Bob nodded. "True. It seemed pretty strange to me even then."

"Even more so because he had spoken to Felicity earlier about some angles."

"And what is really behind it now?" Pete enquired.

"You will be amazed. S-51 and S-53 are two models of high-performance glass cutters! One with cutting wheels made of hardened steel, the other of tungsten carbide!"

"I beg your pardon?" gasped Bob.

Jupiter put the note back in his pocket. "Actually, it's only logical. Somehow the dear Skinny has to get through the safety glass on the second floor! So the number of degrees makes sense—the thicker the pane of glass, the greater the cutting angle must be. At over 160 degrees, this corresponds to a glass thickness of two and a half centimetres!"

"My, my," Pete marvelled. "So that's how one piece of the puzzle fits into the other."

Bob looked outside. "—And on a night as dark as Skinny's soul..."

"Nicely said," the First Investigator agreed, "but I'm sure that was also taken into account. It's a new moon and Skinny wanted the best conditions for his break-in."

"Sure, it's a great way to save on expensive camouflage gear!" Bob added.

"Oh, on the issue of clothes..." Jupiter had obviously thought of something. "Uncle Titus asked me where I put his beloved bomber hat. I think it's still in your car, Bob. I left my backpack there."

"Oh, the bomber hat nightmare! Yes, your backpack is in my car. I'll get it for you tomorrow. In any case, if I were you, I'd advise Uncle Titus to never wear that headgear. It is for a real circus act! When I imagine—" Suddenly Bob froze as if he had just been struck by lightning. "Oh man!"

"Hey, what's wrong now?" asked Pete anxiously.

"Fellas..." Bob muttered, staring at his friends. "I think we should turn around really quickly!"

"Turn around? Why is that?" Jupiter groaned, stunned. "We have to prevent the gallery from being broken into, don't we?"

"Jupe, please don't think I'm crazy, but I don't think this break-in is happening at all!"

It took the First Investigator a few moments to process Bob's words. "You can't be serious!"

Pete's confusion was also clearly written on his face. "I'd better pull over then..."

After the MG had come to a halt, Bob leaned forward excitedly to Jupiter. "Listen! Remember when Skinny surprised us in his garden?"

"Yes, of course," Jupe said. "I was there after all!"

"That's when he said he took what I said about him as a compliment, and then he called me a 'bomber hat bozo'!"

"So what?" asked Pete, irritated. "You said yourself that you looked like a fool with that thing!"

"Yes, but when Skinny showed up, I didn't have the hat on! You, Jupe, had long since put it away in your backpack! So if he saw me with the ridiculous hat—"

"—Then that means that he discovered us right at the beginning of our stake-out!" Jupiter finished the sentence.

The Second Investigator shrugged. "I still don't get it."

"It's quite simple," Bob explained. "If Skinny was watching us from the beginning, then he also saw us sneaking to his window! So he deliberately had that conversation with Felicity!"

Jupiter nodded. "—Knowing that we would listen and draw our conclusions from his phone call. This is also supported by the fact that he opened his window at the exact moment when we were looking for an eavesdropping opportunity. That was a real invitation!"

"Then... I guess the meeting at Chester's was staged?" asked Pete incredulously.

"Everything was staged!" Jupiter retorted. "From the giant with his puzzles; and that creepy Gizmo to the event company... and this supposedly planned break-in at Mitchum & Ferguson! Simply everything! Even the openly lying leaflet in Felicity's car was just a false lead. They must have had a good laugh last night at how well their theatrics with the phantom cowboy and Kaiser the Rottweiller worked out. That must have been the crowning glory of their show!"

The First Investigator glanced frantically at his watch. "Fortunately it's not too late, but we have to go back right away!"

Pete looked at him, puzzled. "And how do you know we have to go back to Rocky Beach and not somewhere else?"

"Because Skinny planned this whole show from the beginning just to get us as far away from the salvage yard as possible tonight!" explained Bob.

Jupiter nodded. "So it must be about something that was right under our noses the whole time!"

"Okay, okay—I get it! Now we go back!" Pete turned the MG around and gave it full throttle.

Bob stared out into the darkness of the night with a gloomy expression. Then he forced himself to speak the terrible thought that was tormenting him.

"Jupe, if the whole thing is a huge red herring, then... then surely the trigger for all this has to be part of it... and that is—"

"Sheila Masters." The First Investigator looked at him seriously. "Yes, Bob, I'm afraid there's no doubt about that."

They were silent for a while. Then Bob murmured, barely audible: "Just like in a fairy tale—a giant, a gnome and a princess. Only this time, the princess is really a witch!"

17. Caught Red-Handed

In the following minutes, Jupiter used his mobile phone to notify Inspector Cotta of their spectacular suspicion. He then tried to call home to warn Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus, but the connection seemed to be broken.

“Did you try calling your uncle’s mobile phone?” Bob asked.

“Yes I did,” Jupe said. “He leaves his mobile phone downstairs when he goes to bed at night.”

With an extremely uneasy feeling, The Three Investigators sped back to Rocky Beach at just about the speed limit, and reached the salvage yard at about half past twelve.

“There’s a blue van over there!” Jupe exclaimed. “That should be the van Mr Hunnicutt was telling me. I believe that Skinny is already here!” The First Investigator glanced around nervously. “The main gate is still locked, but there’s no sign of Inspector Cotta! Where on earth is he? And what about Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus?”

“The intruders might have got in by climbing over the fence,” Pete surmised. “They might even have cut the phone lines!”

Jupe asked Pete to park his car on the road next to the back fence beside Red Gate Rover —a secret entrance into the salvage yard. The First Investigator quickly triggered a mechanism hidden in a hole on the fence. Several boards swung up revealing an opening into the salvage yard. He went in, followed by Bob, and then Pete, who swung the boards back to close the secret entrance.

The three of them then crept along the side of the fence on the lookout for intruders. When they were approaching the storeroom, Bob was the first to realize that his hunch had been correct.

“There is a glow of a flashlight in the storeroom!” Bob whispered and pressed his index finger to his lips. “Keep quiet!”

The three remained motionless and listened intently. Muffled, but still clearly audible, they heard the sound of boxes being ripped apart in the storeroom.

“They are breaking the boxes!” Jupiter muttered.

The First Investigator then pulled his two friends to one side. “I have to go and unlock the main gate so that Cotta and his men can come in,” he said. “Both of you watch the storeroom until I come back.” With that, Jupe rushed off quietly to unlock the main gate.

Less than a minute later, the First Investigator was back.

“Jupe, they broke the padbolt on the storeroom’s door,” Pete whispered. “The padlock is gone as well.”

“We have no idea how many of them are in there,” Jupe murmured. “Still, we have to do something before they run off with the loot!”

“The old forklift truck!” Bob pointed to the right. “If we push that in front of the door, we can block the door from opening!”

“How are we going to do it?” asked Pete uncertainly. “It must weigh a tonne!”

Jupiter shook his head. “It doesn’t. The thing is already completely gutted, but the tyres are still intact. The two metres to the door should be manageable!”

“At least we have to try,” Bob urged.

At that moment, a soft female voice could be heard from inside the storeroom, energetically demanding: "Now hurry up! Put those over here!"

Bob gritted his teeth. "Indeed. It's Sheila..."

"All the more reason to act!" Stooping, Jupiter hurried ahead. "Come now!"

When they reached the forklift truck, they positioned themselves at the rear and Jupiter quietly gave the start signal: "On three, push—one... two... three!"

With a squeaky groan, the vehicle started moving and came to a stop right in front of the door.

"We did it!" Bob groaned with relief.

At the same moment, Skinny's excited voice rang out: "Hey, what was that out there?"

He ran to the door and tried to open it. "Damn! Someone has blocked the door!"

"Then break it down, you incompetent idiot!" hissed Sheila.

An all too familiar bass voice growled in response: "Let me have a go..."

"Oh no!" breathed Pete. "They've got the giant with them!"

A split-second later, tremendous blows thundered on the door, making it tremble.

Bob turned pale with fright. "He's breaking down the door!"

As if in answer, the door burst off its hinges with a crash and was hurled to the side. Then two forearms as thick as a thigh reached into the cab of the forklift and pushed it aside as if it were a shopping trolley standing in the way. As if in slow motion, Giant McLaury heaved his massive body out of the storeroom. His face reflected raging anger when he saw The Three Investigators.

"Now I'm going to break every bone in your body one by one!" he growled.

Panicked, the three of them were about to flee when suddenly a sharp command echoed from the main gate. "Stand still and put your hands behind your head!"

In mid-motion, the giant stopped as if rooted to the spot.

"Inspector Cotta!" cried Jupiter, relieved. "What took you so long?"

Flanked by two other officers, the inspector approached them, with his service weapon in his right hand.

"We were delayed by an accident on Washington Boulevard, but better late than never, right?" He turned to the man next to him. "Doyle, make sure nobody leaves!"

"Yes, sir." Doyle walked past the frozen giant to the damaged door and shone a flashlight into the storeroom. "You two there—come out!"

"Yeah, yeah, it's all right," replied a totally frustrated Skinny.

Skinny stepped out into the open first, followed by Sheila Masters. While Skinny gave The Three Investigators withering looks, Sheila kept her head down as if she didn't dare look Jupiter, Pete and Bob in the eye.

Now Cotta turned back to the boys. "So, you investigators, I want to hear some plain talk! First I'm supposed to alert my colleagues in Santa Monica about a planned burglary at Mitchum & Ferguson, and then suddenly it's all a mistake! Now we are here at the salvage yard in Rocky Beach! So—what is going on?"

"We haven't quite figured it out yet, sir," Jupiter replied, "but with the friendly assistance of our visitors here, I'm sure we'll be able to clear this up."

"Oh, it was all just a little... uh... prank," Skinny spoke up. "We knew there was an important auction planned for tomorrow." He hesitated, as if thinking about how much he would want to say. "Well, and so we wanted to... uh... deface some of the auction items a bit beforehand."

Cotta narrowed his eyes. "Why do you want to do that?"

"We wanted to get one over fatso and his two stooges over there."

"You watch your words, Skinny!" Pete burst out. "If anyone is a stooge, it's you, as you have been caught red-handed."

"For that, you put up this huge effort with umpteen false trails?" asked Bob incredulously.

Skinny grinned. "I had to do it that way to keep you guys guessing. A normal puzzle wouldn't have kept you distracted long enough. We had to build in a few more tunnels for your master investigator. That was the real fun of it!"

The First Investigator deliberately did not respond to this provocation. "I see you have put in place two courses of action to lure us away from here. If we hadn't taken the first bait, there was always the second." He glanced over at Sheila and the motionless Giant McLaury. "But why did those two take part in this? And Gizmo, Felicity and that Mr Chester?"

Skinny sighed grumpily. "My goodness, it's just that we know each other and they wanted to take part in the prank. That's no reason to bring in this special task force!"

"You can safely leave that to us to judge," Inspector Cotta replied coolly. "Let's take a look at what you were trying to do in the storeroom."

With that, Pete led Inspector Cotta to the entrance of the storeroom. The Second Investigator switched on the small overhead light and both of them went in.

"Doyle, get the three of them in here," Cotta instructed. "They've got a lot of explaining to do."

Officer Doyle and the other policeman directed Skinny, Sheila, and Giant McLaury into the storeroom. Jupiter and Bob followed behind.

The Three Investigators proceeded to inspect the mess that the gang had created. Several of the sturdy cardboard boxes which were originally sealed tight, were ripped opened. As Bob helped Uncle Titus arrange the boxes earlier in the storeroom, he knew that each box contained about five pieces of framed paintings that were each separately protected with bubble wrap. Now individual pieces were taken out of the ripped boxes and placed side-by-side on the ground with their bubble wrap removed.

"There are several large cans of black paint here—six of them!" Pete said. "Seemingly the paintings are arranged in such a way for these three to pour paint on them, but they have not got to do it yet."

"There you go, we've done nothing bad," grumbled the giant. "A paint can isn't a bomb, is it?"

"That still leaves trespassing and damage to property," Cotta countered.

"Oh, the old storeroom door!" Skinny waved off. "You blocked it, so we had to bust though it to get out. I'm happy to pay for it! Nothing else happened."

"—But only because we surprised you in time!" retorted Bob indignantly. "—Otherwise you would have destroyed everything!"

Again Skinny grinned. "But we didn't, you bozo!"

Jupe stepped to Pete's side and looked at the paint cans. "This makes me wonder..." he said. "You haven't touched the paint yet, and that despite the fact that you had already broken open well over half the boxes."

Inspector Cotta frowned. "You doubt that they wanted to douse the contents of the boxes with paint?"

"No, I don't doubt that at all. However, I think the whole thing is another ruse in Skinny's grand plan." He pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. "—And for that reason I question why the three had not yet begun their work of destruction."

The giant shrugged his shoulders. "We wanted to have all the paintings placed first before we poured the paint over them. Then we don't have to pour one at a time."

The First Investigator shook his head. "Doesn't sound very convincing, Mr... What's your name, anyway? McLaury isn't your real name, is it?"

"No, it's not," the giant growled unwillingly. "My name is Charlie Tipplepot."

"Charlie Tipplepot?" Pete whispered with a grin. "Did he just come from a chocolate factory?"

"As I said, Mr Tipplepot, such a course of action does not sound very plausible," Jupiter continued. "Besides, you and Skinny certainly would not need Sheila Masters to be present for doing this."

While Jupiter was talking, Bob went around the storeroom to have a look. He was now at the back of the storeroom and then he called out: "There's something here... leaning against the wall behind this cupboard!"

"Don't touch it!" Cotta alerted. "We have to check for fingerprints. Doyle, get that thing out!"

Officer Doyle put on gloves and went to the back of the storeroom. Carefully he took out something big and flat like a panel. Unlike the rest that were covered with bubble wrap, this was in a large light blue packaging folder.

"This could be another painting!" Doyle said. "It's about the right size and weight."

"Lay it on the table here," Cotta instructed and Doyle did as told.

"Yes, it's a polypropylene artwork protection cover for transporting paintings," Bob confirmed. "I can tell you that this is not something that was here earlier."

"Then I'm curious to know what this is..." Cotta said.

18. The Beauty of Lies

Extremely cautiously, Officer Doyle held the protection cover and the inspector, who by now had also put on gloves, pulled out a frame. An opulent painting of about eighty by sixty centimetres unfolded before their eyes. The Three Investigators had their breath taken away at the detailed splendour of the painting featuring a nobly dressed lady in front of a large, gold-framed mirror.

“What colours!” marvelled Pete, spellbound. “Unbelievable! So they were after this painting!”

“Definitely oil on canvas,” Bob remarked, as he had some knowledge about art.

Jupiter nodded. “Judging by the robe and the interior, it is in the Baroque style. Of course, that doesn’t allow us to conclude whether this is actually an original from that period. However, I strongly suspect that our trio of burglars would not have gone to such considerable trouble for a meaningless copy.”

“They only found it after they had broken open several boxes!” Pete concluded.

“Exactly,” Jupiter confirmed. “When we surprised the trio by blocking the door, one of them had the presence of mind to quickly hide the painting behind the cupboard so that we wouldn’t notice it immediately.”

Inspector Cotta looked at Sheila seriously. “Well, Miss Masters, what is it about this painting? I can only advise you to come clean. It will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the determination of your sentence if you cooperate now.”

“You shut up, Sheila!” hissed Skinny.

Cotta turned around. “One more word, Skinner, and I’ll chain you to that forklift truck—feet up!”

Sheila gave a soft shovved sigh. “All right, then. It’s all over now anyway.” She brushed a strand of hair from her face. “When I was preparing for the auction, I was in charge of cataloguing each item and taking photos of them to be included in the auction catalogue. Most of them were nice average stuff at best, but then I discovered this unsigned oil painting... I immediately had a strange feeling because the colouring and brushwork seemed somehow familiar.”

“So you’ve been doing research,” Jupiter surmised.

“Exactly,” Sheila confirmed. “During my checks, it became clear that this painting is very likely *La Belleza de las Mentiras*—a legendary early work by Diego Velázquez that was thought to be lost.”

“Goodness,” the First Investigator remarked. “Velázquez was one of the most important portrait artists and court painter to the King of Spain in the seventeenth century! An original by him must be worth a fortune!”

“I knew that,” Sheila replied, “and I was correspondingly excited. For a long time, neither the artist nor this incredible painting had come to anyone’s attention.”

Pete smiled. “—Otherwise it wouldn’t have ended up in the auction of a salvage yard!”

“In any case,” Sheila continued, “by the time I had some certainty on this, the auction catalogue was already printed, and the painting was packed for delivery here.”

“La Belleza de las Mentiras—‘The Beauty of Lies’,” Jupe murmured. “What an extremely fitting title in this sophisticated game of deception and intrigue!”

“I was really excited and told my cousin Felicity about it,” Sheila continued.

“Felicity is your cousin?” marvelled Pete.

“Yes, and unfortunately not a very reliable one. Even though I had impressed upon her to keep her mouth shut, she had nothing better to do than to let her boyfriend Skinny in on it right away.”

Bob tried to make sense of what he had just heard. “Then... then you’re not with Skinny at all?”

Sheila raised her left eyebrow. “Do I look like his type? ... Anyway, Skinny was immediately on fire. He was desperate to get this painting and later sell it through private channels. With my connections in the art scene, it might have even worked out.”

“I see,” Jupiter murmured. “You couldn’t wait until the auction, of course, because someone might have recognized the painting by some stupid chance.” He scratched his head. “Now I also realize what that little booklet about Spanish masters was about—the one that fell out of your handbag yesterday. You used it to convince yourself, based on detailed analyses of other paintings, that this really could be the lost Velázquez.”

Sheila nodded silently.

“If you are here to steal the painting, then what’s the idea of wanting to pour black paint over the others?” Bob asked.

“We do not only want to take the painting,” Sheila explained. “If we do just that, you would have noticed it because we have photos of all the paintings here in the catalogue. We brought another painting of roughly the same size to swap it with the Velázquez. Then we are going to pour black paint over it and a few others to make it look like a prank.”

“I get it,” Bob said. “By the time we discover the damaged paintings, we would have just thrown them away and struck them off the catalogue. It would have just passed on as a prank like you said, as the paint would seemingly be on random paintings. Nobody would have even realized that there was once a valuable painting among them.”

“Yes, the total count of paintings will be the same,” Sheila murmured. “In fact, except for the Velázquez, the other paintings are not valuable. At least, this way of damage is not drastic —”

“—Compared to setting the whole place on fire?” Jupe asked.

“I didn’t say that!” Sheila protested immediately. “In fact, we never even considered that. The paint cans here clearly prove our intention.”

Now Inspector Cotta took the floor again. “I assume your cousin is currently waiting at home for the return of the famous trio?”

Again Sheila lowered her eyes. “That’s right—waiting for our return with an oil painting by Diego Velázquez...”

The First Investigator folded his arms. “So our friend Skinny was quite elegantly trying to kill two birds with one stone—on the one hand, the theft of a priceless painting and, on the other, the triumph of embarrassing us to the bone with a cleverly faked burglary bait!”

Bob added: “You’ve really gone all out this time, Skinny—false loves, evil giants, ugly gnomes, Western puzzles, and fake companies. Who would have thought that a bomber hat would be your undoing?”

“Oh, shut up, Andrews!” hissed Skinny. “Go take a hike!”

“The only one taking a hike is you—straight to the police department!” Inspector Cotta stated dryly. “Doyle—take them away!”

“Yes, Inspector!” Together with his colleague, Officer Doyle escorted the trio to the squad car.

Cotta looked sternly at The Three Investigators. “So, master investigators, that’s it for today. Please come in the morning for the usual procedures. You should know them by now.”

At that moment, a hoarse voice called out: “Hello, may I cut in?”

Jupiter could not believe his ears. “That can’t be...” He turned to Cotta. “Please wait a moment.”

With hurried steps, the First Investigator went out of the storeroom. Bob and Pete followed him to be on the safe side.

It was an old acquaintance who was waiting for them there.

Dumbfounded, Jupiter looked at him. “Mr Hunnicutt, is there anything I can do for you?”

The old man smiled apologetically. “It’s late, I know, but I was just outside and heard that someone was still here... and...” He hesitated sheepishly.

“Yes?”

“You know, there’s this blue van outside my bedroom window again for three quarters of an hour...”

“Oh, the van!” Jupiter struggled not to laugh. “Yes, it belongs to a visitor who couldn’t wait for the auction. We can arrange to get it out of the way. We wouldn’t want you to miss your beloved sunrise tomorrow.”

“Wonderful, thank you very much!” Beaming, Mr Hunnicutt shook the First Investigator’s hand. He already looked as if he was about to head out of the salvage yard, when he turned to Jupiter once more. “Well, now that we’re standing here in the middle of the night, I have something most interesting for your uncle!” Searchingly, he fumbled in the pockets of his chequered cardigan. “It’s this beautiful fountain pen that Abraham Lincoln used after the end of the Civil War...”

Smiling, Jupiter interrupted him. “Forgive me, Mr Hunnicutt, but we already have a real Baroque painting on offer this week—and one shouldn’t push one’s luck.” He turned to his colleagues. “You agree, don’t you?”

“You’re absolutely right, Jupe,” Pete replied with a grin. “My grandpa Ben always says to be beware of things that are too beautiful—‘either the beauty is not true, or the truth is not beautiful’.”

Bob nodded. “—And that doesn’t just apply to fountain pens!”